



Music videos:

David Guetta featuring Sia *Titanium*

(dir. David Wilson, 2011)

Overview

- David Guetta is a French DJ and music producer who has been active since the early 1980s and has been recording music since the early 2000s. Sia is an Australian singer/songwriter who, before recording *Titanium*, had taken a break from performing; she has since collaborated with several artists and has recorded several tracks with Guetta. *Titanium* was the fourth single from Guetta's album *Nothing but the Beat*.
- The track was co-written by Sia and Guetta. Reportedly, Sia agreed to record the track on the condition that she did not need to appear in the video. The lyrics are somewhat abstract but appear to describe a toxic, possibly abusive, relationship within which the singer is demonstrating their inner strength, allowing them to survive. Guetta has stated that the meaning is, "keep fighting no matter what."
- The video for *Titanium* was directed by David Wilson as one of his first mainstream promos. Discussing *Titanium*, Wilson has said that he was given an open brief – Guetta wanted a narrative but didn't want to be in it. Wilson originally took a humorous approach to the script, but then changed it completely to focus on a superhero boy in a real world. The video was shot in Canada and stars Ryan Lee, an actor who was most well-known at the time for appearing in JJ Abrams' film *Super 8*, a homage of sorts to the 80s films of Steven Spielberg.

- The video is somewhat typical for Guetta, since several of his other promos use the same approach of a genre-driven narrative in which the artist does not appear (for example, *Lovers on the Sun* pastiches spaghetti western while *She Wolf (Falling To Pieces)*, is a fantasy drama.
- At the time of writing, the video has close to 1.6 billion views on YouTube and over 290,000 comments.
- The opening of the video was shot on location in a school; according to the making of video, Wilson claims that Lee's character is not aware that he has caused the destruction which has occurred.
- According to Wilson, at the climax of the video (where Lee's character releases his power), "The policemen aren't listening to Ryan, they're putting him under pressure and the only way to get people

to listen is to unleash this... angry energy, but he doesn't want to do it; it's just something he can't control."

- The sequence where Lee's character is cycling through the streets involved the actor being positioned on a truck to create the illusion that he was cycling at a faster than normal speed.
- The video is a linear narrative and tells the story of a boy with apparently supernatural or paranormal abilities. At the start of the video he has (apparently unknown to him) caused a destructive incident in a school. He escapes from the police, who follow him to his home; to escape again he must use his powers to get keys to unlock a door. He runs to the woods but is again tracked by the police, this time in SWAT gear, who surround him. As he appears to surrender, his powers manifest again and cause an explosion which knocks the policemen down.

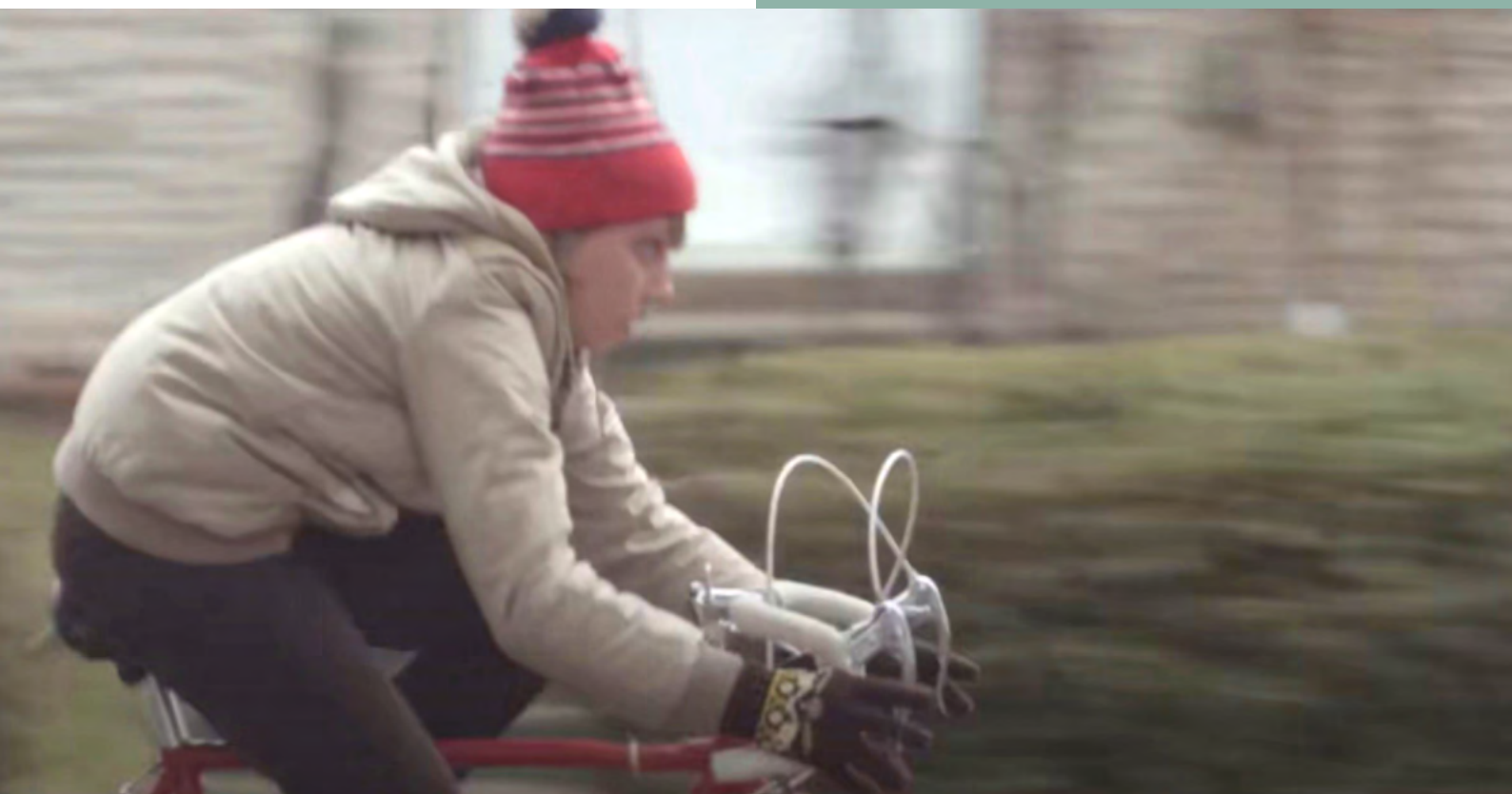
This factsheet introduces *Titanium* as a case study to explore media language and media representations, including a consideration of the social and cultural contexts that influence how media language is used to construct representations. You are reminded that two music videos should be studied as part of the OCR A Level course. *Titanium* should be partnered with one of the three videos on **List A**.

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 both Wilson's and Guetta's comments about the meaning of the song and video align with the visual codes used. 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 fantasy, to communicate a very clear storyline which could be interpreted in several different ways depending upon audience reading.

The video opens on big close-up of Lee's character ("the boy") in a foetal position before a series of shots reveal that he is surrounded by destruction; he is placed in the epicentre. This creates a narrative enigma for the audience. This is further developed by the shot of the teacher on the phone; she appears to be in distress and saying, "help me", although there is no diegetic sound. The sequence as the boy and then the teacher leave the school appears to be slightly overcranked, creating a dreamlike effect and contrasting with the following moments, where the boy rides his bike home at speed. This sequence emphasises the normalcy of his world (and his disconnection from it) and leads into some of the more fantastic events which follow. When the boy returns home, the house is in disarray and the television is on; his story is on the news. The boy quickly packs a bag, but it is clear he has been followed. To escape through a locked door, he uses telekinetic powers to get keys. The boy escapes into a desolate wood but is quickly tracked down. He is forced to his knees, in a pose which mirrors the opening; he released a burst of energy which knocks the police down.

It might be discussed how the video uses the modes of language associated with narrative music video (ellipses, visuals referring directly to lyrical content, a narrative approach which mirrors the progression of the song) to create meaning. The story has a three-act structure (school, house, woods) which mirrors the structure of the song, while the editing of the video very closely matches the editing of the song (for example, the police bursting into the house; the increased pace of the editing as the song approaches its crescendo as opposed to the more sedate editing during the bridge).

The structure of the video and how it combines media language elements could also be considered. The opening moments create a sense of mystery which the video does not attempt to solve. It feels as if the audience has been thrown into the middle of a far longer film. Furthermore, the ending of the video leaves the audience on a narrative enigma. It is unknown whether the boy, or the police, survive. Reasons for these choices might be discussed, as might some of the other media language elements in the video (the positioning of the audience with Lee's character; the production design which creates a slightly retro quality; the gradual unveiling of the boy's abilities through the teacher's reaction, the keys, the floating toys, and the final explosion).

The use of CGI might be considered in relation to how developing technologies affect media language. Most of the video does not involve CGI, the school is a real school which the production team have dressed – according to the behind-the-scenes video, the door which the boy has destroyed was built specially for the promo. As noted, the effect of the boy riding quickly

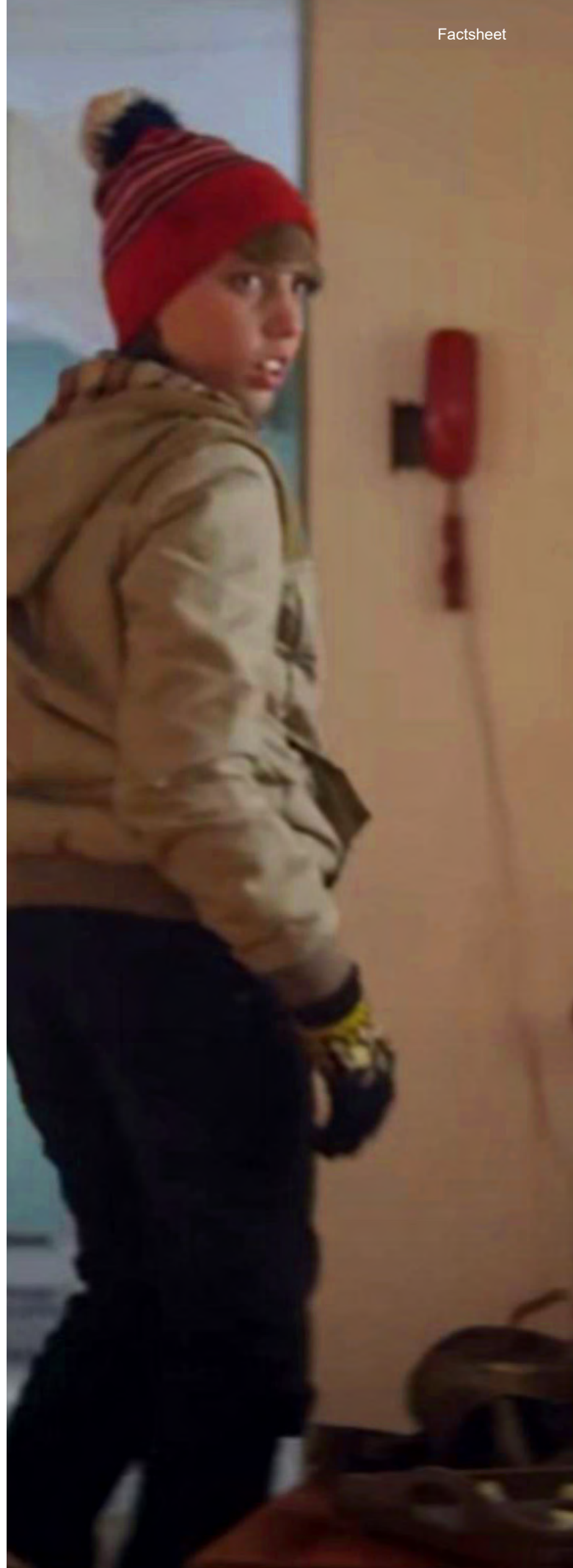
was achieved by using a trailer towed by a truck. The special effects used are quite subtle: the keys flying into the boy's hand and the toys hovering in the bedroom, and some discussion might be had as to why this is done. The most obvious use of CGI is the explosion at the end; according to Wilson, this was created as a composite shot with most elements being practical (the leaves were a practical effect; the policemen were stuntmen) and then being composited in post-production. The effectiveness (or otherwise) of this moment could be discussed.

Audience interpretation of the video might be considered. There are well over 220,000 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, or at least the interpretation of the song (which clearly has meaning for many viewers). Based on Guetta's comments, the song intends to present a positive message. It could be debated whether Wilson's video achieves this – the tone is downbeat and the ending ambiguous. Does the video fit the artist's intentions? Are there multiple readings of the action? Does the lack of closure (or indeed of any explanation as to what is happening) affect audience interpretation (it may be worth comparing the video to Radiohead's *Just*, which has a similarly enigmatic narrative payoff)? Does it explain why the video has so many views?

None of the creators have discussed the ideological positioning of the song (beyond its motivational meaning) or the video. Wilson's interviews in the behind-the-scenes feature explore the technical aspects of the shoot while Guetta does not seem to have discussed the video in great depth. In an interview celebrating the tenth anniversary of the song, he simply said, "The video is a cheap video, because we didn't think it was going to be such a big smash. I don't know how many views [it] has but it's probably around a billion views for a video that cost ... almost nothing".

There is scope to consider the choices made at certain moments in the video related to the combination of lyrics and action, and whether these have an ideological implication:

- The school is depicted as a threatening environment from which Lee's character needs to escape although (as is made clear) he is the threat.
- The image of the terrified teacher suggests an ideological imbalance – an adult scared of a child is unusual.





- There is a binary opposition between the calm child walking along the corridor and the panic of the teacher on the phone in the classroom – an unfamiliar viewpoint and ideologically ambiguous.
- The tonal link to 80s movies such as *ET* and more recent homages such as *Super 8* as well as television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* creates an ideological emphasis on mistrust of authority; the audience is positioned with Lee's character and therefore the police/the school are the antagonists.
- The music video is themed on the supernatural and superpowers, such as the shots of the boy on the race bike and the moment with the keys. This is presented as an ambiguous threat; the audience have seen the impact of Lee's character's power but are presumably siding with him to escape.
- The boy's journey takes him home where he explicitly uses his powers to avoid the police. The house is depicted as being messy and unkempt; there is no-one else there which creates questions about the boy's background – where are his parents?
- The climax uses tracking shots of the child moving through an eerie, bleak woodland. The isolation creates a sense of menace. As the night draws in, flashlights signal pursuit and possibly capture. Ideologically, the audience is positioned with the child rather than the forces of law and order, who are seen as the antagonistic threat, an unusual ideological position.
- The child is constructed ideologically as powerful (and justified) in the battle with the police SWAT team positioned as menacing, ideologically challenging dominant values and beliefs about children and authority – the child is powerful

and drives the narrative of the music video but is perceived as a threat by the adult world.

As noted, there is no "definite" ideological meaning (presumably deliberately so) leaving audiences free to apply their own meaning (some comments have suggested that the video is about bullying; others have discussed its anti-establishment implications). Given that it is (at least partly) a homage to the same kinds of films as *Stranger Things* would later draw on, it is possible that some of the Spielbergian ideas about childhood and small-town America are applicable here.

Codes and conventions

Here you could consider how *Titanium* fits into the broader category of music video as a form, as well as narrative video as a genre. The video clearly includes some relationship between music and images: the repeated "I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose" which is connoted by the boy's supernatural powers or the line "Ghost town, haunted love" which connotes both the supernatural elements of the plot and the general sense of emptiness of the *mise-en-scene* (the line matches a point of isolation for Lee's character). There is a clear narrative through-line which could be considered in the context of other similar videos (Guetta's as well as others such as Avicii's *I Could Be the One*) although, as noted, the storyline is obscure. Some of the lyrics (particularly the lines which are addressed to "you") are presented in a more expressionistic or ambiguous manner; reasons for this might be explored.

Being an urban-dance track with a cinematic music video, generically *Titanium* could be seen as being conventional to the DJ-collaboration genre (many of which do include a narrative element). However, it is unconventional given the genre-specific connotations of the narrative (particularly the way certain actors/

locations have been used to create a very clear sense of homage) and the lack of any performance (most of Guetta's other tracks do feature his collaborators). The lack of conventions of the dance genre (e.g. dancers/stylised shots) or focus on the artist/singer might be seen to be unusual, although DJs tend not to appear in their own videos, which often focus on the guest artist.

The video is clearly intertextual with a range of genre products (see below), explicitly *Super 8* (given the use of actor Ryan Lee) as well as the general tone of, if not specific films of Spielberg (possibly *ET*, at least tonally). A modern audience might also see intertextuality with *Stranger Things*.

The pace of the editing/tension in the video builds as the track nears its climax, demonstrating a conventional relationship between track and video; the audience would be likely to expect this kind of narrative structure based on experience.

The video utilises enigma throughout, seeming to imply a deeper narrative – it might belong to a film or television series – but there is no closure, no

explanation of the boy's powers and no indication of what might have come before (or what happens after). This level of narrative mystery is unusual for a music video and would almost certainly compel audiences to watch the promo several times to try and construct a logical story or work out the "mystery". Reasons for these choices and the effects they have could be discussed in relation to the way genres evolve and change.

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

- science fiction/fantasy
- coming of age drama
- teen/school drama
- superhero.

The reasons for these choices, their effects and significance could be discussed. As noted elsewhere, some of Guetta's other videos play with genre conventions (*Lovers on the Sun*, for example, hybridises western with fantasy) and it might be worth considering *Titanium* in this broader context.



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:

- The casting of Ryan Lee is a direct link to the film *Super 8*, which was also released in 2011.
- The costume design and focus on bikes/small-town America/a woodland chase with the authorities all suggest Spielberg's *ET*.
- Some of the imagery (the cars/outfits worn by the joggers/choice of setting) suggest the 1980s, which viewers might see as intertextual with *Stranger Things* (although *Titanium* was released a few years earlier) or indeed the many films which influenced *Stranger Things*.
- Although it was released the following year, some viewers might see a link with Josh Trank's film *Chronicle*, which also deals with teenage boys acquiring telekinetic powers.
- There is a possible link to the 2008 Swedish horror film *Let the Right One In*, which focuses on a young boy in the 1980s who is bullied and forms a friendship with a teenage vampire.
- Some commentators have suggested a link with Gus Van Sant's 2003 film *Elephant*, a psychological drama inspired partly by the 1999 Columbine shootings.
- There is a link with another Guetta/Sia collaboration from the same album, *She Wolf (Falling to Pieces)*. This video also focuses on a chase between figures of authority (in this case Arctic hunters) and a character with supernatural powers (a possible werewolf); there are clear narrative and structural similarities between the two videos.
- The look and tone of the video, particularly the focus on small-town America, mysterious happenings and a climax in the woods is reminiscent of *The X-Files*, a very popular television show from the turn of the millennium. The show tended to present a mistrust of authority which is also a feature of *Titanium*.
- The poster on the wall in the boy's house is for a 1968 film, *Superargo and the Faceless Giants*. The film is about (according to IMDB), "A masked wrestler/superhero [who] goes up against a madman and his army of robots."

Media representations

Processes of representation

Given that neither Guetta nor Sia were involved in the video and that Wilson took a very broad approach to interpreting the lyrics, the level of self-representation in this video is clearly very low. Sia's lyrics are possibly somewhat autobiographical, but this seems to have had no bearing on the video beyond the most abstract reading. Discussions of selection and combination in the creation of representation might include:

- The representation of the school – is it an oppressive environment which the boy must escape from? Is he under threat? Where are the other pupils and teachers?
- Lee's initial representation – what might the audience read into his behaviour, particularly the close-up of him on the bike? Is he trying to escape whatever happened in the school?
- The representations of the panicked teacher and the first police officer – do the audience feel sympathy for the character (earlier she can be seen to mouth, "help me")?
- The representation of the boy's house – messy, food and clothes strewn around (although his room is tidy), invaded by the news story on the TV – which becomes more menacing when the police arrive.
- The police who break into the house are represented as more of a threat – seen first in silhouette (including a shot of a gun) and then later just as feet; the audience share their shock at the reveal of the floating toys.
- The woods are not represented as a place of safety; the skeletal trees and derelict building the boy travels through do not seem to offer any comfort since his isolation and fear are clear from the various shots of him, particularly the long shots where he seems lost in the vast, empty environment.

- The staging of the end of the video represents the woods as a dangerous place and the police as antagonists. The shots of the lights searching for the boy represent his being hunted while the final moments (where he is kicked to the ground and threatened) represent the police in a very negative way; the audience perhaps feels catharsis when the boy uses his power in response.
- Lee's look, which is vaguely androgynous; is this of any significance?

Wilson described how he planned a narrative which focused on a superhero boy in a real world. Discussions of realism and versions of reality could explore how successful (or otherwise) he has been. For example:

- Does the use of devastated school setting create a sense of realism when the teacher's behaviour is considered?
- What is the effect of the sequence where Lee's character cycles home – does his speed and expression detract from the realism?
- What effect does the use of slow motion have?
- Do the realistic representations of the house create an effective counterpoint to the more paranormal elements such as the keys or the floating toys?
- How "real" is the ending of the video in comparison with the rest of the action?

Considering that the video is about a character with unnatural powers who is placed in the real world (a trope of many fantasy stories), discussions might explore ideas of generic verisimilitude as well as cultural verisimilitude; how realistic (for example) is the behaviour of the police or the teacher in the circumstances described?

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
- abuse of power
- neglect
- teenage experience
- attitudes to school.

Cultural contexts might include:

- Ryan Lee as a (then) slightly successful actor
- the intertextual references mentioned above and their significance (or otherwise)
- the relationship of *Titanium* with other videos of Guetta tracks.

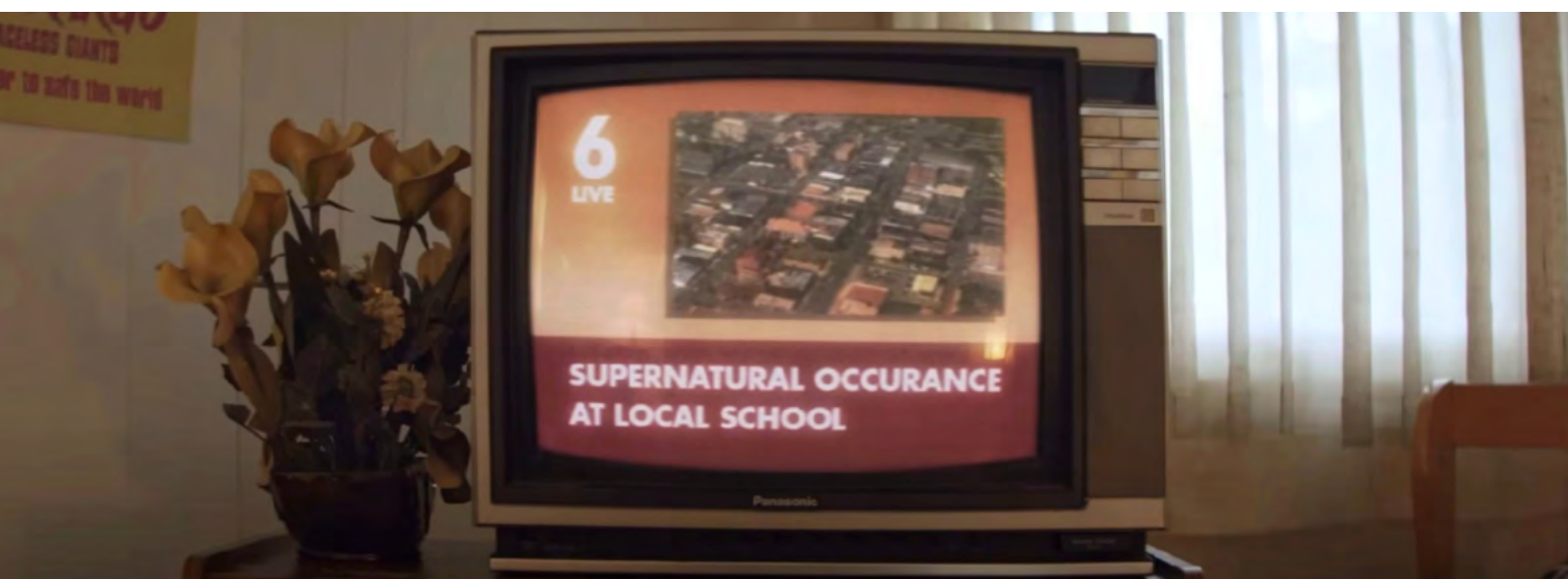
Discussion might be had of the way contemporary contexts influence the representation of society in the video. As noted, it is not clear whether the video is set “now” or at some point in the past. The clothes worn by the teacher and the police officer’s car suggest a retro setting, as does the slightly sepia grading, the brown/beige colour scheme, the television and the styling of some of the characters. However, the SWAT team seem to have contemporary gear and weapons. Reasons for these choices might be considered.

Representational issues

In some respects, the video makes use of several features which may be stereotypical or archetypal. There is a degree of ambiguity which is open to

audience interpretation. Elements which might be explored include:

- Whether the boy is a hero, victim or a villain.
- The stereotypical look of the school and the house.
- The contrast between the boy’s room and the state of the rest of the house.
- The slightly surreal moment with the two female joggers.
- The somewhat stereotypical representations of the police as unsympathetic and as a threat.
- The sequence in the woods, which uses a stereotypical depiction of the wilderness as hindering rather than helping.
- The interpretation of the ending.
- The central concept of the video relies upon certain stereotypes of the teen/supernatural/fantasy genre, particularly the awkward-looking main character and the suburban US setting, although many of the actors chosen seem to have a stereotypical “genre” look about them.
- The video is clearly playing on stereotypes found in “actual” teen fantasy/sci-fi films.
- A modern audience might also see *Titanium* as a stereotypical *Stranger Things* style fantasy, although (as noted) the first episode of *Stranger Things* was not broadcast until 2016, five years after the release of *Titanium*; other audiences might see elements which could be seen as stereotypical when compared to films like *ET* or television series such as *The X-Files*, both of which codified the genre which *Titanium* pays homage to.



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

- The representation of a teenage boy who seems to be struggling with his identity.
- The representation of teachers who have lost their authority.
- The representation of the police as being initially helpless and then overbearing and brutal.
- The lack of representation of the boy's parents and the implications this has for his life.

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

- Although the audience is positioned to feel sympathy for Lee's character, the teacher seems genuinely scared, the school has been destroyed

and there are no other children or adults – are the audience right to side with him?

- The two women jogging are an odd contrast to the rest of the narrative – how is the audience meant to feel about them? Why are they there?
- The police are presented in an unsympathetic way, but it could be argued that they are trying to protect the public from a terrible threat – is the narrative right to do this?

It is clear that Wilson is not presenting a balanced representation, given that the video almost solely focuses on Lee's character. As noted above, there does not seem to be any particular ideological standpoint being taken (apart from the stereotypical mistrust of authority which is a trope of this kind of drama), so perhaps no significance should be ascribed to this.



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 the video was "*Stranger Things* before *Stranger Things*. Even have the same hand gesture at 2:35 when using telekinesis powers. I wonder if this video inspired some of *Stranger Things*' direction."

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 teacher or the parents? The representation of the police is clearly mostly negative – is this fair?

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 follow parts of Todorov's ideas of narrative structure, albeit in a slightly stunted manner. Although the video follows a linear trajectory, it seems to start after the disruption has occurred (the audience

never find out what the equilibrium was, although it seems clear from the end that Lee's character was responsible for disrupting it). The video also fails to present any sort of closure or new equilibrium, leaving the narrative at a point where an attempt to repair is occurring (from the boy to prevent his capture or from the police prevent the boy from doing any more damage). It could be argued that these enigmas are part of the video's appeal.

Genre – Neale

The video includes several elements which link to Neale's ideas, particularly his points about evolution of genres through repetition and difference. It could be argued that the entire video is an attempt at

genre repetition given the number of references and influences. This also provides some evidence to suggest that the video's intertextuality might contribute to the idea of intertextual relay given its positioning in the canon of dramas focusing on teenagers with paranormal powers.

Theories of Representation – Hall

Given that the video's narrative is open to interpretation, any meaning can be contested since no meaning has been ascribed by any of the creators. This then puts the audience in the position of deciding what the preferred reading might be and whether the representations are stereotypical or countertypical.

[David Guetta - Titanium ft. Sia](#) (YouTube)

['Titanium': The Story Behind David Guetta & Sia's Club Anthem](#) (udiscovermusic.com)

[The Story Of David Guetta's 'Titanium' feat. Sia | The Making Of An EDM Anthem](#) (YouTube.com)

[David Guetta - Titanium \(Behind the Scenes\) ft. Sia](#) (YouTube.com)

[David Guetta 'Titanium' \(feat. Sia\) by David Wilson](#) (promonews.tv)

[Superargo and the Faceless Giants](#) (wikipedia.org)

[Sia reveals embarrassment over 'Titanium' release](#) (nme.com)

[David Guetta Has Found Balance 10 Years After 'Titanium': 'I'm As Free As It Gets'](#) (billboard.com)

[Superargo and the Faceless Giants](#) (imdb.com)

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