

Pharrell Williams, 'Freedom' (2015)

https://youtu.be/LIY90IG_Fuw

Subject content focus area

Media language

Representation

Media Industries

Audiences

Contexts

Background context

- 'Freedom' was released in 2015, two years after Pharrell Williams' previous global hit 'Happy'. The video was directed by Paul Hunter and was nominated for Best Music Video at the 2016 Grammy Awards.
- Pharrell has a long history in the music business, beginning with hip-hop production duo The Neptunes and hip-hop-rock band N*E*R*D in the 90s, then a successful solo career in the 2000s. He has also written and produced music for artists such as Ariana Grande.
- Pharrell Williams is what is termed a 'Renaissance Man' - someone who is highly talented in a number of different areas. He has an 'umbrella brand' called *i am OTHER* which incorporates Pharrell's fashion labels, movie production company, record label, and social activism initiatives. In the concept, photography and design of the video for 'Freedom' we can see these elements combined.
- The celebration of racial and cultural diversity seen in the video could be a response to controversy over Pharrell's earlier comments about the 'New Black' and race relations in America. In 2013, demonstrations took place in the USA to protest about violence towards black people, and the Black Lives Matter movement was established. (There had been several cases of unarmed black people being killed by police officers in the USA.) The link below shows Pharrell Williams explaining his views in more detail: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMmXC_MgHlc

Part 1: Starting points - Media language

- The video is a good example of montage editing, where a number of seemingly unconnected images are cut together to suggest a theme or create a specific emotional reaction.
- 'Freedom' is a music video that combines both concept (strong, complex themes about diversity, revolution and nature) and performance (Pharrell - and others - sing and dance throughout). It also includes some narrative elements in its portrayal of oppressed people rebelling and gaining power.

- One convention of music videos is the use of 'snapshots' of a story: a key dramatic moment in a character's life (e.g. the slaves seizing the gun from the guard).
- The pace of the editing - and the musical and dance performances - match the fast-paced rhythm of the song, emphasising the emotional and energetic mood.
- Throughout the video there are several images that suggest liberation: birds flying, whales leaping, girls running naked, a stunt motorcyclist. These images are often in slow motion and are full of energy and optimism.
- The first shots are of modern, bustling cities, but these soon turn into images of less developed or more ancient cities, and to panoramic shots of spectacular natural landscapes (deserts, mountains, jungles). These link to the lyrics of the song that discuss the importance of "where we're from" in our identity.
- The shots of nature, particularly those that connect man and animals (the rodeo rider and horse, fisherman and whale, Pharrell posing like a cheetah), also link to the lyrics near the end of the song: "Atoms in the air/ Organisms in the sea/ The son and yes, man/ Are made of the same things". This suggests a unity between people and nature.
- There is also a message of solidarity: that, as diverse as the human race is, we are all 'the same'. This is shown in the short scene where the lines of female models rip off their wigs and defiantly stride out of shot.

Media contexts - Cultural

- The song rejoices in diversity and personal freedom. It encourages the spectator to respect other cultures and traditions, connect with nature and take positive action for social change. This is in opposition to the conservative, anti-immigration and nationalist messages and values which are gaining power in some countries around the world.
- The messages in the video also links to Pharrell's organisation (and YouTube video channel) *i am Other*, which he describes as a "cultural movement dedicated to Thinkers, Innovators and Outcasts."
- Pharrell uses new technology and social media to effectively promote his own work, businesses (he owns, amongst others, fashion brand Billionaire's Boys Club) and 'social good' projects. He cleverly combines corporate sponsorship (Apple Music) with social activism (UN International Day of Happiness). His ideology of self-empowerment can be seen on his website, which is co-constructed by fans, but which also promotes and sells his various products.

Part 2: Starting points - Representation

- Ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is promoted in the video. People from a global range of cultures and traditions are shot in rich, bright colours, with no particular lifestyle being given dominance. Western capitalist culture is actually portrayed quite negatively (e.g. the dilapidated

shopping mall in which Pharrell sings) compared to the joyful dancing and singing of the non-Western scenes.

- The diversity of the human experience is also celebrated. We see a range of different cultures, clearly indicated by costume (colourful scarves, robes, make-up and jewellery) and location. Many of the cultures are shown in a joyful, energetic way, for example the Gospel church singing and dancing. The message is that all cultures should be respected, and our differences embraced and celebrated.
- There are also iconic images of rebellion and revolution that construct representations of issues and events, such as: black slaves seizing the gun of their oppressor; a Lego recreation of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1980s China; a sweatshop factory. The *mise-en-scène* for these segments is less colourful and more dimly lit. This creates a feeling of oppression that symbolises what the characters in each clip are rebelling against.
- Being 'different' and rebelling against conformity is also a main theme. In one segment, a room full of robotic female models rip off their wigs and this could be seen as a portrayal of women rejecting stereotypical ideas of female beauty.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Media industries

- Pharrell Williams is a songwriter and media producer as well as an artist: he has his own record label, *i am OTHER*, and produces music for other artists (featured on his website). At the time of the release of 'Freedom' Williams was an established artist and had achieved a great deal of success, most notably through the single 'Happy' which sold over 1.8 million copies in the UK alone.
- Williams is also signed to Columbia Records which is part of Sony Music, a large conglomerate. It was announced in 2018 that he had renewed his deal with Sony/ ATV Music Publishing and that he is one of the company's top 5 licensed artists, showing that he and his music are in high demand.
- The song 'Freedom' was released in June 2015 exclusively on the streaming service Apple Music, and was used extensively in the launch campaign and marketing for the new service. This is a good example of artist and corporate brand *synergy* ('cross-media convergence').
- The video features a large cast and a range of locations, demonstrating high production values typical of a high budget music video released on a major label. It was later released on Williams' official YouTube page and, as of September 2019, has received over 90 million views.
- The song also featured on the soundtrack for the film *Despicable Me 3*, increasing the potential audience reach of his music. Williams had composed music, including 'Happy', for the earlier films in this franchise.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Audiences

- Williams' music appeals to large and diverse audiences: the release of 'Freedom' on Apple Music and its inclusion on the *Despicable Me 3* soundtrack, for example, targets music fans and filmgoers of different ages.
- The messages in the lyrics and video are universal and might appeal to audiences of different ethnicities, genders and ages.
- Williams' collaborations with different artists (including Daft Punk, Justin Timberlake and Ariana Grande) also widens his potential audience to fans of these artists.
- In terms of the Uses and Gratifications theory, audiences might find the video entertaining but also thought-provoking, fulfilling the need for information (perhaps through the references to historical contexts such as slavery). Some people might personally identify with the characters or situations featured, while the messages and values could provide a stimulus for discussion and debate about current issues (social interaction).
- There was a positive critical response to 'Freedom'. The video was described in *Rolling Stone* (a specialist music publication) as 'liberating, mesmerising...visually stunning'. A review on the *Billboard* website (*Billboard* compiles the music charts in the USA) stated: 'Pharrell unites cultures and countries to convey the human experience in its fullest, freest expression'.
- These responses would seem to demonstrate a preferred reading of the video, according to Stuart Hall's Reception Theory.