

# Water Aid audio-visual advert

(2016)



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**AS Component 1:  
Investigating the Media  
A Level Component 1: Media  
Products, Industries and Audiences**

**Focus areas:  
Media language  
Representation  
Audiences  
Media contexts**

## PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The charity *Water Aid* was established in 1981 as a response to a United Nations campaign for clean water, sanitation and water hygiene education. It now works with organisations in 37 African, Asian and Central American countries plus the Pacific region. Since 1991 its patron has been Prince Charles.
- Created by *Atomic London* in October 2016, this advert (titled *Rain For Good*) stars 16 year-old Zambian student Claudia and aims to show how communities benefit from clean water by depicting everyday chores such as farming and laundry.

## PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

### Cultural context:

Following 1984's *Do They Know It's Christmas?* single for *Band Aid*, 1985's *Live Aid* was the first global charity event aiming to raise funds for relief of the ongoing famine in Ethiopia. The *Comic Relief* telethon was launched by Richard Curtis and Lenny Henry in 1985 with the same initial famine relief aim, and went on to raise over £1bn for charitable causes across Africa and in the UK. The contemporary **audience** for this advert could be assumed to be familiar with the **codes and conventions** of both audio-visual adverts and those for charitable organisations in particular.

### Consider genre – and the significance of subverting genre conventions:

- The *Water Aid* advert reinforces charity advertisement **conventions** by including key information about the concern, a personalised narrative to which this information is relevant, and a direct appeal to the audience for money.
- However, the fact it lacks a **non-diegetic voiceover**, melancholic **audio codes** and black and white **visual codes** could all be seen as **unconventional** of this advertising **sub-genre**.

### Consider codes and conventions, and how media language influences meaning:

- The opening **medium shot** with a **pull focus** between the digital radio and the rain against the window establishes the advert in a modern, British setting (the **audio codes** are of an announcer with an English **accent**). It's **connoted** that the scenes that follow (in an unnamed but likely African country) are happening at the same time.
- The **visual and audio** codes work together to construct the narrative of “sunshine” (in Africa) “on a rainy day” (in Britain) with the associated problems of drought and “lack of access to clean drinking water” that the charity is aiming to relieve.

### Consider theoretical perspectives

#### Semiotics – Roland Barthes

- Suspense is created through the **enigmatic** use of the **slow-motion, medium close-up, low-angle tracking shot** of Claudia's feet and the swinging bucket (Barthes' Hermeneutic Code) and emphasised by the crescendo of the song in the scene at the water pump over which the informative **on-screen graphic** appears (Barthes' Proairetic Code).
- **Barthes' Semantic Code** could be applied to the lines from the song used from 00.34 **diegetically** and then as a **sound bridge** over the **medium**

**shot** of a group of women carrying water buckets on their heads: “make me feel, make me feel like I belong... don’t leave me, won’t leave me here”. The **connotation** here being that the text’s audience can help Claudia “feel like she belongs” and “won’t leave” her there / in that situation if they donate to *Water Aid*.

- The **Symbolic Codes (Barthes)** of drought-ridden African countries are reinforced both visually and through the advert’s **audio codes** up until about 00.47.

### A level only:

#### Structuralism – Claude Lévi-Strauss

- How texts are constructed through the use of **binary oppositions** – at 00.47, the song’s title line “sunshine on a rainy day” is used over shots of children running, playing, laughing and the more positive **connotations** of this section of the advert are emphasised by the **high key lighting** used.
- A further **visual binary opposition** is created between the arid, washed-out, primarily beige and brown **colour palette** of the advert’s first third and the more vibrant colours used at 01.02.
- The **on-screen graphic** (“650 million people still don’t have access to clean drinking water”) creates a **conceptual binary opposition** between Claudia’s positive story and that of other, less fortunate people. It’s this opposition that the audience is encouraged to be part of the solution to by giving “£3 today”.

## PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

### Social context:

An interesting intertext to consider would be *Water Aid’s ‘No Choice’* TV advert from 2013 which is more **conventionally** constructed and **represents** the suffering of its main ‘character’ in a more explicit and emotive way (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szT7grQnHRU>).

Launching the *Rain For Good* campaign, *Water Aid* said that it had “deliberately broken away from the traditional charity ad formula” in response to the public’s desensitisation to traditional fundraising tactics. The **stereotypical** ‘victim’ needing our help is an **archetype** with which the **audience** would be familiar from many other charity adverts. This would perhaps make the more positive representation of Claudia as a healthy, independent and musically talented woman stand out to an

audience who might otherwise have become immune to the emotive representations **conventionally** deployed by this advertising **sub-genre**.

### Consider how representations are constructed through processes of selection and combination:

- The **dress codes** of the advert’s main female character include a **stereotypical** knee-length skirt and pink **colour palette** in both her top and shoes.
- Her age is similar to the other young women she walks past at 00.30 and those who join her at the water pump at 01.00. This **connotes** that she has perhaps had to “grow up too quickly” because of the tough environment in which she lives. Her independence is **connoted** by the **wide-angled shot** at 00.18 in which she is **denoted** on her own on a long and empty dust road.
- **Close-up shots** using **handheld cameras** (00.16), her open, confident **gesture codes** (00.51) and her **smiling gesture code** (01.09) **represent** her as the advert’s **protagonist** and a ‘character’ with whom the **audience** can positively associate.

### Consider theoretical perspectives:

- **Stuart Hall’s theory of representation** – the images of a dry, dusty African environment in which people may be struggling to survive form part of the “shared conceptual road map” that give meaning to the “world” of the advert. The more positive **audio codes** then work to challenge these **stereotypical representations**, creating **enigmas** around why Claudia appears to be so positive. The solution to these enigmas is given to the **audience** at 01.00 when we first see the water pump.
- **David Gauntlett’s theory of identity** – Claudia acts as a **role model** for the type of lifestyle changes that the **audience** could be responsible for creating if they donate to *Water Aid*.

### A level only:

- **Liesbet Van Zoonen’s feminist theory** – by assuming the **stereotypically** male roles of ‘**protagonist**’ and ‘**provider**’, Claudia is perhaps contributing to social change by representing women in non-traditional roles. The work involved in collecting the water is physically challenging (non-traditional for female roles) though the advert does reinforce stereotypes of women being associated with care of children.
- **Gilroy’s ethnicity and post-colonial theories** that media texts reinforce colonial power could

be applied, as *Water Aid* is encouraging its British audience to ‘help’ those like Claudia who live in ‘less developed’ countries.

### PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

#### Social/cultural context:

In December 2016, this advert had been viewed about 47 000 times on *Water Aid*’s YouTube channel and this page also actively encourages the sharing of the advert through social networks. Further evidence that the likely **target audience** are literate with technology is that donations are encouraged through the **imperative** “Text SUNNY to 70555” and the use on the YouTube page of a twitter hashtag (#ShareSunshine).

The advert’s cover of Zoe’s 1990 song *Sunshine On A Rainy Day* could indicate that the **target audience** are in their 30s–40s as they’re likely to remember the original and get pleasure from the nostalgic value of hearing a song with which they’re familiar.

#### Consider how industries target audiences, and how audiences interpret and use the media:

- The likely **audience demographic** is constructed through the advert’s use of a young woman with whom they might **personally identify (Uses and Gratifications Theory)**. Parents might make similar readings, identifying empathetically with the ‘better life’ that *Water Aid*’s clean water provides for the children represented in the advert.
- *Water Aid* acts as an **Opinion Leader** for the **target audience** who would assume the “650 million people...” statistic (01.14) is true and reliable.
- The **unconventionally positive visual codes, audio codes and representations** would, the producers hope, give the advert **unique selling points** compared to other charity appeals and therefore make the **audience** more likely to donate.

#### Consider theoretical perspectives:

##### Reception theory – Stuart Hall

- The use of **handheld camera shots** and **indirect mode of address** made by Claudia **connote** that the audience is following her story, but *Water Aid* rather than she herself have constructed this **narrative** for us. This, according to Hall, is the dominant or **hegemonic encoding** created by *Water Aid*.
- The fact that she’s named creates the **preferred reading** that she is a real person and that the **audience** should invest in her narrative, sharing *Water Aid*’s **ideologies**.

##### Cultivation theory – George Gerbner

- This theory might suggest that audiences have become used to the **conventions** of this **sub-genre** of advertising and perhaps somewhat ‘immune’ to pleading, earnest **non-diegetic voiceovers** by well-known voices and black and white, slow-motion, emotive **representations** of people suffering.
- The **target audience**’s likely liberal political perspectives will have been shaped by exposure to previous, generically similar adverts, shaping their world view that the suffering of people less fortunate than themselves can be alleviated by charitable donations.