

Semiotic Analysis of Gun Violence Representation in Childish Gambino's *This Is America*

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ABSTRACT

Gun violence, as illustrated in Childish Gambino's "This Is America," highlights a social problem in the United States and the unequal impact on Black populations, revealing racial inequality. Previous studies of *This Is America* have concentrated on racial representation, racial inequality, and violence. However, little attention has been paid to the gun violence in the music video through semiotic meanings. The objective of this research is to analyze the representation of gun violence in "This Is America" using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The study, using a descriptive qualitative method, analyzes selected scenes from the music video through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that the video presents gun violence as a normalized social reality tied to systemic racism, media distraction, and cultural desensitization to violence. This study finds that this is an important cultural text that challenges dominant myths of freedom and equality in American society.

Keywords: *Gun Violence, Semiotics, This Is America, Racial Inequality*

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INTRODUCTION

Gun violence is still a major public health crisis in the United States, with consistently high mortality rates when compared to other mortality factors. In 2022 alone, there were more than 48,000 firearm-related deaths recognized, making it one of the deadliest years on record, highlighting the severity (Solutions, 2024). Research shows that gun violence still becomes a structural and societal challenge over the long period (Ben-Michael et al., 2024). Crucially, the burden of gun violence is disproportionately borne by different populations. Black communities are disproportionately impacted; firearm homicide accounts for a majority of gun-related deaths in this population. Research indicates that approximately 81% of gun-related deaths among Black Americans are homicides and that Black males, while representing a small percentage of the population, account for more than 50% of all firearm homicide victims (Center, 2026). Moreover, national statistics on firearm homicide rates for Blacks are consistently higher than other racial groups, even with overall reductions in rates (Kegler et al., 2023). Longitudinal data also show a recent increase in racial inequities in gun violence. For example, the Black-White firearm homicide rate ratio has increased since 2014 to some of the highest rates observed within the recent decades, with thousands of excess deaths among Black populations attributable to this inequality (Knorre & MacDonald, 2026). These figures demonstrate that gun violence in the United States is not just a public safety issue but a symptom of more fundamental structural inequalities, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, residential segregation, and access to preventive resources. Thus, this crisis calls for policy reform and targeted intervention that address the underlying social determinants of racial disparities in firearm violence.

The persistence of gun violence is also deeply connected to larger historical and cultural narratives in the United States. The right to keep and bear arms has long been read into the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and firearms ownership is a deeply

ingrained part of American political identity. In addition to its legal significance, gun ownership has generated a unique gun culture that celebrates self-reliance, individual liberty, and armed citizenship (Kalesan et al., 2016). Scholars have argued that this culture developed from frontier ideology and the legacy of settler colonialism in which guns became instruments of territorial conquest, racial domination, and white supremacy (Anderson, 2021; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018). Thus, contemporary gun violence cannot be understood merely as a public safety problem but as the outcome of historical, cultural, and ideological forces embedded in American society. Recent scholarship additionally emphasizes the continued relevance of debates about the Second Amendment to the balance of constitutional rights and firearm regulation in the United States (Cornell & Cornell, 2018; Metzl, 2026).

Popular music videos are becoming major cultural texts that entertain and provide complex social and political critique. They are visual and auditory forms of mass media that shape public discourse by reflecting and challenging the dominant ideologies within society (Storey, 2018). In a powerful and controversial way, Donald Glover's 2018 music video "This Is America" by Childish Gambino captures this hard reality. By early 2026, the video had amassed more than a billion views on YouTube. Childish Gambino's "This Is America" was internationally acclaimed for its powerful and disturbing portrayal of violence against people of color, media distraction, and social upheaval in the United States. The provocative imagery in the video has generated widespread discussion, constituting a powerful cultural artifact in contemporary popular culture (hooks, 2015).

It has hyper dances in the front and executions, riots, and police chases hidden in the background. This arrangement reveals how entertainment distracts people from racialized violence (Margaretha & Panjaitan, 2020). "This Is America" by Childish Gambino, instead of just being a modern work of art for entertainment, still remains a powerful cultural representation of the gun violence issue that is still going on in the United States. This song still goes on to reflect the realities of America's social context, where mass shootings, police brutality, and racial injustice still become a critical ongoing national problem. The music video shows the chaos, fear, and distraction of gun violence and how it has been normalized in everyday life. It also points to broader systemic problems, racial injustice, and political interference. Also, the continued inadequate impact of gun violence on Black communities shows the racial tensions reflected in the song. "This Is America" brings to light the ongoing issue and is a relevant and critical object to analyze today's gun violence crisis, making it an important and timeless object of study for this research.

The video uses fragmented scenes, repetitive movements, and layered symbolism to tell its story, rather than a conventional linear storyline. The effect of these stylistic choices is a sense of disorientation, which mirrors the chaos and contradictions that characterize American society. The juxtaposition of elaborate dance numbers and graphic violence highlights the tension between spectacle and trauma, emphasizing the ways in which spectacle often obscures suffering (Kellner, 2019). This non-traditional narrative structure encourages the interpretation of meaning rather than passive consumption of the content. Donald Glover (aka Childish Gambino) is a multi-talented artist who has created TV shows like *Atlanta* and music that speaks to societal issues. His song "This Is America" addresses the subject of racism and gun violence in America with explicit imagery and symbolism. The music video presents a completely different challenge. Scenes of brutal violence contrast Gambino's dancing happiness with mass shootings and symbolic references to racial oppression, such as the Charleston church shooting. The video discusses systemic racism, police brutality, and cultural appropriation and comments on how American entertainment distracts from the harsh realities Black communities face. It's deeply layered, evoking imagery of Blackface minstrelsy, historical racial violence, and the appropriation of Black culture by the mainstream audience, making it a profound and complex social commentary, experts say. As a collection, these songs are strong artistic statements that call upon listeners to face deep-rooted social inequalities and injustices in America through powerful lyrics, storytelling, and imagery.

The complexity of the visual and audio elements of Childish Gambino's "This Is America" has led to a range of interpretations among scholars. The music video, as a cultural text, presents complex images of race, violence, entertainment, and social inequality in the United States through symbolic imagery and contrasting scenes. The video cuts back and forth between musical performance and violent, jarring imagery—including gun battles, public shootings, and allusions to racialized violence. "This Is America" does not present violence as a series of separate individual acts, but rather as a larger social reality that is linked to structural inequalities, racism, and the marginalization of Black communities. The disjointed story, the repetitive actions, and the multiple layers of symbolism all create a sense of disorientation that mirrors the contradictions that exist in American society. The difference between entertainment and violence points to how spectacle can divert audiences from social suffering and political realities (Kellner, 2019). Thus, the music video offers a rich ground for exploring how visual representations convey more complex cultural and ideological messages.

Semiotics provides a useful framework for analyzing how meanings are constructed through signs, symbols, and cultural representations. One of the most influential approaches in semiotics is Roland Barthes' theory of signification, which builds on the linguistic model of Ferdinand de Saussure, examining how signs produce meanings beyond their literal interpretations (Barthes, 1972). Barthes (1972) states that there are three levels in which meaning works: denotation, connotation, and myth. The denotative level is the direct, literal meaning of a sign, while the connotative level deals with the cultural, emotional, and ideological meanings associated with a sign. Myth is the highest degree of signification. It accounts for the naturalization of some meanings and their acceptance as common truths in society. Barus & Siregar (2025) argue that these three levels are crucial to understanding how signs communicate wider social and cultural meanings as they reveal the ideological messages that are embedded in cultural representations.

Previous studies using Barthes' semiotic theory demonstrate that visual and textual representations can reveal hidden ideologies in cultural artifacts. Researchers can study how media texts generate meanings beyond their surface representations by analyzing signs, images, symbols, gestures, and narratives. From this perspective, films, music videos, and other popular cultural forms are not only entertainment but also cultural texts that reflect and reproduce social values, conflicts, and the dominant ideology (Barthes, 1972).

Because it relies on symbolic representation, "This Is America" lends itself to semiotic analysis. The music video has different signs like weapons, performances, police presence, and scenes of violence, which creates multiple layers of meanings. The denotative level defines the literal representation of these images. The connotative and mythical level enables an analysis of the signs' relation to larger issues of racial injustice, social control, and the normalization of violence. Using Barthes (1977) framework, this study analyzes the role of gun-related imagery in the music video in producing meanings and in contributing to the representation of gun violence as a normalized aspect of American social reality.

Previous studies have examined "This Is America" from several perspectives, including racial representation, political criticism, and multimodal analysis. For example, Margaretha & Panjaitan (2020) examined the music video through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the relationship between lyrics, gestures, visual composition, and performance. In their work they examined the ways in which "This Is America" deals with racial discrimination, police brutality, Black identity, and the commercialization of Black culture. Saraswathy et al. (2022) demonstrate that linguistic and symbolic elements in "This is America" construct meanings related to racial inequality and violence. However, while gun violence was recognized as one of the major issues that the video represented, their study did not specifically study how gun violence is constructed through visual signs and symbolic meanings; rather, they emphasize verbal signs rather than visual representations of gun violence. In addition, it did not use Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze how gun-related images create meaning through denotation, connotation, and myth.

Thus, this study is an attempt to fill the gap in previous studies by analyzing the representation of gun violence in Childish Gambino's "This Is America" using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The previous work generally addresses the larger themes of racism, Blackness, and social critique. This work specifically investigates the ways in which visual signs produce understandings of gun violence and help to build cultural myths about violence in American culture. This study uses Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth to show how "This Is America" works as a semiotic text that compels the audience to critically engage with ideological systems that normalize and obscure racialized violence.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of gun violence in Childish Gambino's *This Is America*. Qualitative research is a process of understanding and interpreting the meanings that are found in social and cultural experiences (Shank, 2002). This enables the researchers to study in depth the cultural signs and meanings in a particular social context. It is appropriate for semiotic studies because it allows researchers to analyze signs, symbols, and ideological messages embedded in cultural texts (Kim et al., 2020). This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as the main analytical framework and takes a postcolonial stance as a supplementary approach to understanding the wider historical and social contexts behind the representation of violence, race, and power relations in American society. The postcolonial approach is useful for analyzing how historical systems of oppression and unequal power structures continue to shape cultural representations, particularly those related to Black identity, racial inequality, and social injustice.

The data source for the study was the music video "This Is America" by Childish Gambino, released in May 6th, 2018, by RCA Records. The video touches on several social issues, such as gun violence, systemic racism, police brutality, and social distractions in contemporary American society. The data were visual elements in the music video, such as scenes, gestures, actions, characters, settings, and symbolic objects related to gun violence and related social issues. The video was downloaded from an official and publicly available source on YouTube to ensure the authenticity of the data.

The scenes examined in this study were chosen using purposive sampling in accordance with the research aims. Researchers watched the entire music video several times, looking for scenes that explicitly or implicitly depicted gun violence, racial inequality, police brutality, and other visual elements relevant to the study. The analysis is confined to scenes with significant visual cues, including body gestures, facial expressions, camera angles, symbolic objects, setting, color, and character interactions. These selected scenes were viewed as representative because they help construct meanings about gun violence and reinforce the interpretation of ideological messages contained in the music video.

The data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which explains the process of meaning construction through three levels, denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972). This study used Barthes' theory to examine how visual signs in "This Is America" create meanings about gun violence. The first level of analysis was denotation, and it was concerned with the literal and observable meaning of visual signs. At this stage, researchers identified and described visual elements in selected scenes, including characters, settings, movements, objects, and actions related to violence. The second level was connotation, which examined the deeper cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings associated with these visual signs. At this point, the researchers understood how the chosen scenes represent larger social issues, specifically in the context of race, violence, and representation by the media in American society. The third level was myth. Myth is about ideological meanings that are naturalized in a culture. At this level, the researchers investigated how the representation of gun violence in the music video reflects and reinforces particular cultural beliefs, especially the normalization of violence and inequality in the United States.

In addition to Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this study applies a post national American Studies approach to situate gun violence within the contested cultural and ideological meanings of "America." Post national American Studies challenges nation-centered and exceptionalist understandings of the United States by examining how American identity, culture, and power are shaped by racial histories, unequal social relations, imperial formations, and interactions beyond national boundaries (Adi, 2020). From this perspective, *This Is America* is interpreted not merely as a representation of domestic firearm violence but as a cultural text that exposes the contradictions between dominant American ideals – such as freedom, equality, democracy, and security – and the racialized experiences of Black communities. This approach therefore provides the broader cultural and ideological context of the study, while Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth remain the primary analytical tools for interpreting the selected visual signs.

In this study, the procedures suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) in analyzing the data, such as data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, were adopted. During the data reduction stage, the relevant scenes and visual elements that represented gun violence, racial inequality, and social issues were selected and classified according to the objectives of the study. In the data display stage, the collected data were presented in analytical tables with descriptions and interpretations based on Barthes' three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The postcolonial perspective was also used to further interpret the relationship between visual representation, historical context, and power relations. Finally, conclusions were drawn by analyzing the ways in which the music video produces and expresses ideological meanings about gun violence, race, and inequality through its visual representations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gun Violence



Figure 1. First Shooting Scene (0.52/4.04)

At the denotative level, Childish Gambino is centrally positioned in the frame and assumes an exaggerated pose before shooting the hooded Black man playing the guitar in the head. His body is leaning forward and one leg is behind him. He is smiling just before he pulls the trigger. The man in the hood sits passively on a chair, his back to us, not attempting to resist. The camera focuses on both figures in the foreground, clearly showing the shooting as the victim collapses while the empty warehouse is silent. In terms of Barthes, these visual elements constitute the denotation of the scene prior to interpretation.

On a connotative level, Gambino's exaggerated pose, smile, and gesture invoke racist Jim Crow caricatures of Black people as entertainers. The meaning is produced in the theatrical performance of Gambino and the helplessness of the victim. This immediate transition from dancing to shooting echoes how violence against Black people has been normalized and consumed as spectacle. The hooded man is powerless, yet the camera stays on Gambino, suggesting that Black artists are expected to perform as racial violence unfolds around them. There was little emotion and only a brief pause when the gunshot was fired, emphasizing society's indifference to Black pain.

The myth in this scene is the naturalized belief that Black lives are worth less than the systems that produce violence. This is reinforced by the visual juxtaposition of the victim and the weapon; the body of the victim is immediately dragged away, while the gun is carefully wrapped in a red cloth and carried with respect. This is an ideology that values guns more than Black lives. Gambino references America's history of slavery, segregation, and racial violence to criticize how media and entertainment distract audiences from systemic racism and normalize violence against Black communities.

The scene makes the case that racism and gun violence are ingrained in American society. Gambino's performance connects old stereotypes about race to current violence. The gun is treated with care, unlike the victim, showing unequal values. The warehouse context and absence of intervention imply such violence is repeatedly ignored. These visual elements support this study's argument that *This Is America* critiques the normalization of gun violence, dehumanization of Black people, and transformation of racial violence into entertainment.

In a post national perspective this is a scene that works against the image of America as a nation of equality and freedom. Gambino ties the Jim Crow imagery to violence today, to show how slavery and segregation still affect the lives of Black Americans. The scene does not uphold national ideals but instead highlights racism and gun violence as structural problems embedded in American society. Thus, the scene supports the study's larger argument that *This Is America* critiques the contradictions of American identity.



Figure 2. Gun In Red Cloth (0.54/4.04)

At the denotative level, the sequence establishes a visual opposition between the treatment of the firearm and that of the victim. Immediately after the shooting, an assistant approaches Gambino with a red cloth, receives the handgun without touching it directly, and carries it away carefully. In contrast, the victim's body remains on the floor and is subsequently

dragged away with comparatively little ceremonial attention. The meaning of the scene is therefore produced not only by the presence of the gun and the body but also by their contrasting movements within the frame. The weapon is elevated, wrapped, and protected, whereas the Black body is lowered, exposed, and removed.

At the connotative level, this contrast constructs a hierarchy of value in which the firearm receives greater symbolic care than the life it has destroyed. Rather than simply suggesting that “Americans value guns more than people,” the sequence critiques a dominant discourse of American gun culture that treats firearm possession as a protected expression of liberty while racialized victims of gun violence remain socially vulnerable.

At the level of myth, the scene destabilizes the naturalized association between guns, freedom, and individual security. Through a post national American Studies perspective, the image exposes the uneven distribution of the nation’s promise of protection: the weapon is symbolically secured, while the Black citizen is denied safety, dignity, and recognition. The scene, therefore, challenges an exceptionalist image of the United States as a nation in which freedom and security are equally available to all.



Figure 3. Mass Shooting in The Church (1.56/4.04)

Denotatively, it sets Childish Gambino entering a church in which Black choir members are singing together. Continuing the scene, he abruptly acquires an automatic handgun and starts shooting choir members, turning the peaceful scene into a bloody massacre. Following Barthes’s argument, these visual elements convey the literal meaning of the scene.

The illusion of an actual mass shooting that has victimized the Black community can be seen connotatively, with a concrete example of the Charleston Church shooting. The Black church represents protection, cultural legacy, and community support, while the choir represents solidarity, spirituality, and shared identity. The sudden emergence of violence breaks these interpretations. It suggests that racialized violence can occur in places that are thought to be safe and welcoming. The shooting serves as a metaphor for the constant threat of gun violence that Black communities in the US face.

This image embodies the misconception that religious buildings are inherently safe from harm. This is disproved by the incident, which shows how deeply racial violence is embedded in American culture, making even churches and public spaces scenes of violence. By framing these attacks as symptoms of larger systemic issues, Childish Gambino counteracts the notion that they are isolated cases.

The scene makes the point that America has no safe space from racialized gun violence. The mass shooting is a reminder of actual violence against Black congregations, but the church choir represents the community, spirituality, and protection. The use of an automatic weapon shows the extent of gun violence and its intensity. The destruction of a place of worship questions the idea that places of worship can always protect people against the evil that exists in society. Moreover, the church shooting reflects the continuous impact of racial violence rather than an isolated act of violence. By referencing the Charleston church shooting, Gambino shows that safe spaces and community are also affected by systemic racism. The scene challenges the national narrative of equal protection by showing the unequal realities faced by Black communities.



Figure 4. Immediate Switch (2.05/4.04)

Denotatively, the scene shows Childish Gambino dancing right after the mass shooting. No shock, sorrow, or sympathy can be seen through him after the brutal deed. Instead, it quickly turns back to dancing, a portrayal of enjoyment, shifting the audience's attention from the victim to the choreography.

Gambino's actions are an indication of emotional distance from violence on a connotative level. The abrupt change from murder to dance reveals how violence is readily ignored or embraced by popular culture. The scenario flips the focus from mourning and effects of the massacre towards fun. This contrast is the tendency of society to ignore human suffering and to view violence as a normal part of public life.

Represented by this scene is the myth that violence is enjoyable and amusing without moral consequences. It undermines this suggestion that society can become desensitized towards suffering and death through constant exposure to violence. Childish Gambino employs this image to mock the society in which violence is a form of entertainment and diversion rather than a tragedy.

It suggests that media and entertainment culture have the ability to desensitize violence and distract society from human suffering, visually suggesting to the audience to focus more on entertainment and not its human implications by following the slaughter with dancing and other performances. This facilitates ignoring repeated violent crimes and is symptomatic of a wider process of emotional and social desensitization. Moreover, the sudden changes from violence to dancing criticizes how American media and entertainment can shift audiences' attention from social injustice. Gambino indicate that spectacle often receives more attention than racial violence, revealing how entertainment culture can normalize inequality.

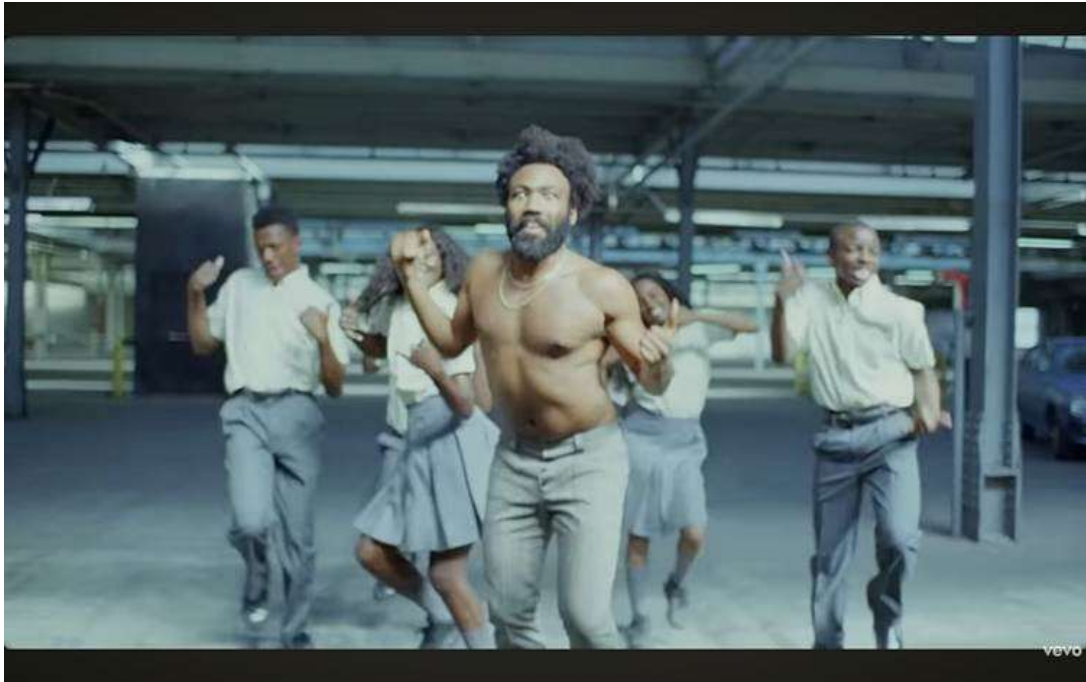
Media Influence

Figure 5. Children Mimicking Gambino Dance Movements (1.10/4.04)

Denotatively, the scene is about school-uniformed children following and mimicking Childish Gambino's dance moves. The children were ecstatically absorbed in the choreography, moving in time to the rhythm, as all around them spiraled into chaos. Through the connotative lens, the scene alludes to the great power of artists and popular culture over society, especially over the young generations. The children's attention to mimicking Gambino's dance rather than the violence and chaos surrounding them is a metaphor for how people are often drawn to entertainment and distraction rather than social problems. The dance is itself a metaphor for the way media and music and popular culture can distract the public from the important issues of society. It is a reflection of the myth that popular entertainment is harmless and just fun. But it also undermines this idea by showing how entertainment can influence public attention, perspective, and social awareness. It also feeds the myth that media and celebrity figures can shape what society chooses to notice and what it chooses to ignore. With this depiction, Childish Gambino comments on a culture in which entertainment frequently overshadows pressing social realities.

The scene suggests that the public can be easily led through music, dance, and popular trends to ignore major issues such as violence and injustice. It foregrounds the children's synchronized performance, leaving chaos in the background, showing how entertainment can distract audiences from dealing with major social issues and prompting people to focus on spectacle rather than reality.

The video also shows how this scene of media and popular culture shapes public attention from an early age. The children are paying more attention to copying the dance while ignoring the violence happening around, suggesting that entertainment can influence how society reacts to injustice. Rather than celebrating American popular culture, Gambino questions his role in maintaining social inequality.



Figure 6. Dancing In the Middle of Chaos (1.35 / 4.04)

Familiar to the prior point, this scene, on the denotative level, depicts Childish Gambino dancing joyfully with children in school uniforms while riots, violence, and fires continue to play out in the background. The visuals present a stark contrast between the joyful performance in the front and the social chaos unfolding in its background. According to Barthes, these elements are the denotation of the scene as it is directly presented to the audience.

Focusing on the dancing element, it connotatively implies how they distract from violence and disorder in the background with dancing. The choreography signifies entertainment, popular culture, and viral media trends that are easily eye-catching to the public. The children represent innocence, showing how easily perceptible the viewers are to focusing on entertainment instead of social realities, and the younger generation illustrates how early violence and its distraction is normalized. The dance guides the audience's gaze, making the surrounding chaos ignored and normalized.

The myth reflected in this scene is the belief that entertainment is harmless and purely pleasurable. However, the scene complicates this notion by showing how entertainment can act as a tool that distracts society from systemic injustice and violence. It also supports the ideological notion that media consumption leads audiences to prefer entertainment over awareness of social problems. Through this representation, Childish Gambino criticizes a culture where spectacle and viral trends often eclipse serious social issues.

The scene argues that entertainment is often used as a distraction from society's ongoing problems, such as racial inequality and systemic violence. Amid all the chaos, Gambino's energetic choreography with the children stands out to the audience. The children also symbolize the socialization of the younger generations into a culture of distraction. This way, the viewers are encouraged to pay more attention to the performance than to the violence, mirroring broader patterns of media consumption in which injustice recedes into the background.



Figure 7. The Chaos in the Background (2.16/4.04)

Denotatively, the scene shows people running in panic, cars out of control, and fires in the background, while Childish Gambino is dancing calmly in the foreground. The visual effect is striking in its imbalance between the chaotic surroundings and the amusing performance.

The chaos also has a connotative function. It stands for the instability, violence, and social unrest in American society. This contrast of foreground and background suggests selective public attention, where entertainment and spectacle are paid more attention than the serious social problems going on around them. Violence is obviously there, but it is secondary to entertainment, with fear, destruction, and disorder in the background.

In this scene, the myth is the belief that America is a stable and orderly society. The scene debunks this myth by showing the violence, unrest, and systemic problems that are underneath. It also means that social chaos is often minimized or ignored as entertainment continues to dominate public attention.

American society often prefers spectacle and diversion to the confrontation of social disorder and violence. In the center of the frame, we see Gambino performing, while chaos is happening behind him. This image illustrates how media and popular culture can distract from realities like racism, violence, and social inequality, which enables those realities to go unnoticed.



Figure 8. Children Recording with Handphones (2.29/4.04)

Denotatively, the scene depicts children shooting the surrounding chaos with their mobile phones. Instead of intervening or reacting to the violence and chaos happening around them, they decide to capture the events through their screens.

The scene depicts a modern culture of social media on a connotative level, where people are likely to become watchers but not participants in the solution of social problems. Pushing people to want to consume or share shocking events on the Internet rather than do anything about them. To make them record and be a passive watcher. The mobile phones are the symbols of digital spectatorship, implying that technology increasingly determines the way people experience and react to violence. It suggests that much of our attention is mediated by screens rather than a direct encounter with reality.

The myth reflected in this scene is that awareness will automatically lead to social change. In this scene, it undercuts through the suggestion that watching, recording, or sharing violence could solve injustice or lead to real solutions. In this representation, Childish Gambino critiques a culture in which observation is often confused with activism and documentation is prized over action.

It suggests that the modern media culture encourages passive viewing rather than meaningful reactions to injustice. The image shows children and onlookers recording events instead of intervening, showing how violence can be content that is produced and consumed. Hence, social problems are often recorded rather than solved, and society tends to watch human suffering on screens rather than address its root causes.

Chasing Scene



Figure 9. Chasing Scene (3.50 / 4.04)

The final scene denotatively shows Childish Gambino running through darkness being chased by a crowd that can be interpreted as white authority figures or police. His face and his frantic movements give a strong sense of desperation and fear. The scene connotatively represents survival, fear, and the inability of Black people to fully escape racial oppression in America. Gambino draws the audience in with dance and performance for most of the video, but the ending hints that his identity as a Black man is constantly under siege. The hunt also mirrors a world where Black artists are celebrated as entertainers and then face backlash, silencing or cancellation when they speak out against systemic racism and social injustice. The

reversal of roles from performer to hunted victim signals the instability of Black lives in American society.

The scene mirrors the myth of freedom and safety in America and how Black people are not given those ideals equally. It implies that Black existence is defined by constant surveillance, fear, and vulnerability, regardless of success or popularity. Childish Gambino's representation suggests that entertainment cannot save Black people from systemic racism and violence in society. The final chase scene proves this argument; it shows that the powerful Black artists are imprisoned in the structures of racial discrimination where the voice against injustice provokes punishment, rejection, and social persecution. The scene makes the case that Black Americans still live under the constant threat of fear, surveillance, and violence. The chasing crowd represents social, racial, and institutional pressures. The dark gives off an atmosphere of uncertainty and vulnerability. The ending is ambiguous, implying the struggle against racism is still ongoing.

The final scene challenges the American ideals of freedom and equality. Although Gambino is celebrated as an entertainer, he remains vulnerable to racial surveillance and violence. The chase suggests that Black Americans continue to face unequal treatment despite the nation's democratic ideals, highlighting the gap between America's promises and lived realities.

Final Synthesis

Together, the nine scenes show that *This Is America* depicts gun violence as a series of acts of physical violence but also as a cultural and structural phenomenon deeply embedded in American society. Barthes' denotation, connotation, and myth show how gun violence has been normalized throughout the history of racism, unequal power relationships, and the ongoing devaluation of Black lives. Childish Gambino doesn't present violence as isolated incidents but as part of a larger system that still exposes Black communities to fear, exposure, and systemic inequality. In the scenes, Black bodies are consistently depicted as disposable, while guns, entertainment, and public spectacle are given more attention, which acts as a form of dehumanization that helps to normalize violence.

Another common theme is the effect of media and entertainment in shaping public responses to violence. Dance, music, viral performance, and digital spectatorship all the time divert attention from racial injustice and toward spectacle. Media culture is not framed as a stimulus for critical engagement but as a force of normalizing violence, of turning it into entertainment and consumable content. In this sense the media is less a tool of propaganda than of distraction, commodification, and spectatorship, calling on audiences to watch violence rather than engage with its structural causes. "Entertainment is so desensitized to gun violence, we forget the human suffering that goes along with it," says Gambino.

Viewed through the lens of the post national American Studies approach, these representations also challenge the nationalist trope of the United States as a nation defined by freedom, equality, and democracy. Rather, the music video reveals the contradictions between these ideals and the lived experiences of Black Americans, showing that racial violence cannot be understood as isolated acts of criminality but as the consequences of historical and systemic inequalities. The post national perspective, then, complements Barthes' semiotic analysis in that it exposes how the meanings generated throughout the music video ultimately critique the ideological construction of "America" itself. Overall, the findings suggest that *This Is America* depicts gun violence as a normalized consequence of structural racism, sustained through the dehumanization of Black lives and mediated through media spectacle that distracts public attention from the social conditions that produce this violence.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory offers an effective way to discover the deeper meanings hidden in Childish Gambino's *This Is America*. The music video, through the analysis of denotation, connotation, and myth, shows that gun violence is not portrayed as just individual acts of brutality but as a social issue connected to racism, inequality, and the marginalization of Black communities in the United States. At the denotative level, the video provides visible signs such as dancing, shootings, weapons, and scenes of social chaos, while the connotative level shows how these signs symbolize the normalization of violence, racial injustice, and the use of entertainment as a distraction from social suffering. On a mythological level, the video counters dominant narratives of America as a country of freedom, equality, and progress by revealing the continued existence of racial inequality and systemic violence. This study, informed by a postcolonial perspective, further demonstrates how these representations reflect historical and ongoing power relations that contribute to the marginalization of Black communities and the continuation of racialized social structures. Thus, *This Is America* serves as a critical cultural text, employing symbolic representations to expose underlying ideologies regarding gun violence, race, and power within contemporary American society.

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