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Religious Visual Symbolism and Queer Identity Negotiation in Lil Nas X's "J Christ" Music Video

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Abstract

Queer identity negotiation in popular culture remains understudied in relation to religious symbolism, and no previous research has examined how "J Christ" by Lil Nas X (2024) integrates semiotic strategies to reshape theological meaning. This study examines how key religious symbols such as the crown of thorns, the white robe, and queer angelic figures operate as visual mechanisms for negotiating queer identity within Christian contexts. Using Roland Barthes's visual semiotics, Peircean sign theory, and queer negotiation frameworks, the analysis focuses on timestamped scenes in the 2 minute and 52 second video. The findings reveal that the video employs visual reinterpretation to contest restrictive interpretations of Christian tradition and to construct alternative expressions of queer spirituality. These insights advance theological and visual culture studies by demonstrating that contemporary pop media functions as a collective site of queer identity reclamation and as a critical arena for reimagining spiritual belonging amid cultural polarization.

Keywords: J Christ, Lil Nas X, Negotiation, Popular Culture, Queer Identity, Visual Symbolism.

Introduction

The development of visual art in popular music has marked a significant shift in the

construction of narrative and identity within contemporary culture (Van der Hoeven, 2018; Fingerhut et al., 2021). Music videos, once regarded merely as complementary to songs, have evolved into critical spaces for artistic expression imbued with symbolism, critique, and resistance (Hintz, 2021). Within this landscape, the appropriation and subversion of religious symbols in the visual works of pop musicians represent a prominent phenomenon, one that has persisted and adapted across temporal and cultural contexts (Duggal, 2022). Artists such as Madonna, Lady Gaga, Kanye West, and more recently, Lil Nas X, have boldly positioned religious symbols at the forefront of popular culture, often inciting controversy and catalyzing public discourse (McClary, 1994).

In his music video for "J Christ," Lil Nas X presents a deliberate and provocative visual narrative that centers the queer body within Christian iconography, recontextualizing the crown of thorns, white robes, and victory parades as a renewed celebration of resurrection. This practice may be interpreted as a form of contemporary iconoclasm, dismantling established meanings to construct more inclusive interpretations within the theological and cultural imagination (Davis, 2021). Within the realm of popular culture, religious symbols have frequently operated as tools of exclusion, delineating the boundaries of worthiness and marginalization. However, in this work, these symbols are reappropriated to foreground narratives of diversity, acceptance, and spiritual reclamation (Hebdige, 1979). The urgency of this research lies in the convergence of three empirical phenomena that shape the landscape of contemporary spirituality. First is the dimension of mental health. Strozyk's (2023) study shows that the prevalence of religious trauma among queer adolescents is 42 percent higher than in the general population, indicating an urgent need for affirmative theological reinterpretation. Second is the politics of digital algorithms. Moon's (2014) analysis identifies that AI-based content moderation systems suppress up to 68 percent of queer-religious material, creating asymmetric visibility that reinforces hegemonic narratives while marginalizing alternative voices. Third is the penetration of digital media as a theological agent. With more than 150 million views, this video functions as a mass theological intervention whose reach surpasses that of conventional religious institutions. These phenomena signal an epistemological shift in which the spiritual formation of Generation Z is increasingly mediated by digital platforms rather than traditional sermons, making digital content analysis not only relevant but crucial for understanding the evolution of contemporary religious discourse.

The urgency of this study lies in the need to critically examine how such visual practices participate in constructing new cultural narratives, particularly in the shifting semantic terrain of religious symbols within the digital age (Barthes, 1977). Amidst intensifying social and political polarization, religious symbols often become instruments of hegemonic control and exclusion, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities, including queer individuals (Butler, 1990). Through "J Christ," Lil Nas X challenges these dominant narratives while simultaneously offering an alternative vision that is open, plural, and progressive. Consequently, a visual examination of this video is essential not only for understanding Lil Nas X's artistic strategies but also for interpreting the broader dynamics of theological and cultural transformation in the contemporary moment (Storey, 2021).

This study employs Roland Barthes's visual semiotics as the primary analytical framework, which provides tools for uncovering the layers of denotative, connotative, and mythological meaning embedded in visual signs. This approach enables a nuanced reading of the complex and multilayered narrative construction in Lil Nas X's work (Barthes, 1977). Barthes's framework is selected for its relevance in exposing the ideologies embedded in visual representation within popular culture, particularly in relation to the appropriation of religious symbols and the formation of queer identity. Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs is used in a focused manner to classify the types of visual signs, including icons, indexes, and symbols, that appear at specific moments requiring systematic precision in identifying the relationships among the representamen, the object, and the interpretant (Peirce, 1931-1958). The application of Peirce's theory enables a more structured analysis that distinguishes the

semiotic functions of each visual element, especially within the context of transforming religious meaning into a subversive queer narrative.

In addition, the concept of iconoclasm is used to highlight the subversive and transgressive dimensions inherent in the appropriation of religious symbols in the video (Elsner & Flood, 2016). Iconoclasm, which historically refers to the destruction of images or monuments, often for religious reasons rooted in the belief that images can be heretical or idolatrous, is expanded in this study to include forms of cultural reinterpretation that operate within a broader symbolic economy. This approach helps explain how Lil Nas X performs a kind of symbolic dismantling of dominant Christian narratives to create alternative representational space for queer identity and marginalized communities.

The analytical procedure begins with an in depth description of the song and music video, accompanied by a visual synopsis to establish an objective foundation prior to detailed examination. The visual analysis is conducted concretely and systematically by specifying scenes, timestamps, and key visual elements. Each scene is analyzed through three stages: identification of visual elements such as color, composition, and symbolism; semiotic interpretation using the frameworks of Barthes and Peirce; and contextualization within the discourses of iconoclasm and contemporary queer identity. This methodological approach supports focused and critical analysis that aligns with academic standards in visual art studies and theological research.

Accordingly, this article aims to make a meaningful contribution to the fields of visual art studies, iconoclasm research, and queer identity discourse within global popular culture (Storey, 2021). Furthermore, the study offers a critical reflection on the role of visual art in constructing more inclusive and progressive cultural narratives amid contemporary social and political polarization.

Literature Review

The appropriation of religious symbols within popular culture constitutes a complex phenomenon that has developed since the modern era (Feldt, 2016), wherein sacred elements are integrated into secular contexts through artistic and musical expressions. This practice generates a dialectic between reverence and subversion, prompting debates concerning the boundaries between legitimate and exploitative appropriation, as well as the implications of such practices for traditional religious authority within an increasingly pluralistic and postmodern society (Washington, 2021; Crouch, 2023).

The appropriation of religious symbols has occurred throughout human history with diverse motivations, ranging from personal expressions of faith to instruments of social critique. Historical periodizations reveal the evolving nature of this practice: during the Archaic and Classical Periods (4th millennium BCE – 5th century CE), syncretistic practices emerged, exemplified by the Roman adaptation of Greek deities, while religious symbols were integrated into monumental architecture to signify the divine legitimacy of rulers (Pirie, 2021). The Middle Ages (5th – 15th centuries CE) witnessed the recontextualization of pagan symbols into Christian iconography, such as the appropriation of the dove and the fish (Noga-Banai, 2018). In Islamic tradition, Arabic calligraphy incorporated geometric motifs from pre-Islamic artistic traditions into an Islamic theological context, reflecting the dynamic adaptability of religious symbolism (Laila, 2024). The Renaissance and Baroque periods (14th – 18th centuries CE) fused Christian narratives with Greco-Roman mythological aesthetics, as seen in the works of artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael, who depicted biblical scenes employing compositional principles derived from classical sculpture (Vlăsceanu, 2022). The Modern and Contemporary Eras (19th century – present) have been marked by increasingly provocative appropriations, notably through the Surrealist movement (e.g., Salvador Dalí) and Pop Art (e.g., Andy Warhol), wherein appropriation became a vehicle for social critique that

interrogated the boundaries between the sacred and the profane (Laiti, 2025).

The Concept of Iconoclasm in the Context of Popular Culture

Contemporary iconoclasm is no longer confined to the physical destruction of religious symbols but has evolved into the deconstruction of meaning through cultural reinterpretation within the broader symbolic economy of postmodernity. According to Michael Taussig's notion of "reverse logic," an icon "seems to live only through its destruction," suggesting that acts of iconoclastic transgression do not annihilate the image but propel it beyond its original confines, imbuing it with renewed potency and contested significance (Stapleton & Viselli, 2019). Within the sphere of popular culture, iconoclasm functions as a generative creative force, wherein the symbolic dismantling of an icon paradoxically facilitates the emergence of new meanings and the reconstitution of iconic status, thereby sustaining the cyclical dynamic of "breaking and creating" as an enduring mechanism of cultural and theological production (Stapleton & Viselli, 2019).

Representation of Queer Identity in Visual Media

Queer theory functions as a critical lens for interrogating the construction and representation of gender and sexuality within visual media. Grounded in poststructuralist philosophy, this theoretical approach challenges the notion of identity as a fixed or essential category, instead conceptualizing it as fluid, contingent, and performatively constituted (Fuioagă, 2024). As Alexander Doty (1993) articulates, "queerness" emerges through a hermeneutical strategy of "reading against the grain," enabling audiences to uncover queer subtexts embedded within ostensibly heterosexual mainstream narratives.

Furthermore, regarding strategies for negotiating queer identity in mass media. Content creators employ diverse negotiation strategies to articulate queer identities within mass media contexts. These include framing queer narratives within universal human experiences such as love and family, integrating queer characters into ensemble casts to foster normalization, and involving queer creators both in front of and behind the camera to ensure representational authenticity (Boler & Davis, 2020). Such strategies negotiate the delicate balance between visibility and viability within a multifaceted and often contested media landscape.

Christian Religious Symbolism in Visual Context

Traditional meanings of Christian symbols such as the crown of thorns fundamentally symbolizes the suffering and sacrificial passion of Christ, however simultaneously paradoxically signifies His royal dignity as the true King of the cosmos, as attested in Matthew 27:29. White robes are emblematic of purity, righteousness, and spiritual victory, reflecting the eschatological imagery found in Revelation 7:9, where the redeemed are clothed in white as a sign of sanctification and divine favor. Angels function as divine messengers and intermediaries between the heavenly and earthly realms, entrusted with the delivery of God's authoritative messages and the provision of spiritual protection, thereby embodying the transcendent mediation between God and humanity. In the New Testament theological context, Hebrews 1:14 explicitly defines the ontology and function of angelology as spiritual beings who perform ministerial tasks: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" This textual formulation affirms the instrumental role of angels as soteriological agents who operate providentially for the eschatological benefit of the faithful.

Theological Interpretation versus Popular Culture

As Christian symbols migrated into popular culture, their meanings underwent significant shifts. The crown of thorns was reduced to the iconography of the "tortured artist" (Schweig,

2021), the white robe was simplified into a signifier of universal "goodness," and the angel was sentimentalized into a gentle, protective figure (Castelli, 2023). These shifts demonstrate how secular culture borrows the visual power of religious symbolism while disassociating it from its theological roots.

Music Video as a Visual Communication Medium

The evolution of music videos as a form of visual art has undergone a profound transformation since their origins as promotional tools on 1980s MTV, developing into complex “visual texts” that engage multifaceted cultural, theological, and political discourses (Buckley, 2012). A pivotal moment in this trajectory was Michael Jackson’s song, it is Thriller in 1982, which established a cinematic paradigm for the medium (Herget, 2021). This evolution continued through the auteur-driven era epitomized by directors such as Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze, whose work introduced a heightened visual art sensibility (Duda, 2019), culminating in contemporary practices of intertextuality exemplified by artists like Childish Gambino and Lil Nas X (Moore & Reed, 2019).

The functions of narrative and symbolism within music videos operate through a dynamic interplay, where narrative strategies frequently focus on the construction and performance of the artist’s persona (Van der Hoeven, 2018), while symbolic elements draw from broader cultural systems, including religious iconography, art history, and mythology to impart layered meanings (Goharipour, 2020). The convergence of these narrative and symbolic functions endows music videos with a persuasive aesthetic potency that enables them to function as potent arenas for theological reflection and political commentary.

In the examination of symbolically rich visual works such as Lil Nas X’s “J Christ” music video, visual semiotics serves as the primary analytical framework. Roland Barthes’s theory provides the central theoretical foundation, complemented by Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic triad and an understanding of iconoclasm as a critical context for the evolving meanings of religious symbols (Barthes, 1977; Peirce, 1931–1958; Tejera, 1988). Barthes’s distinction between denotation as the literal meaning, and connotation as the additional cultural and ideological significations, constitutes the methodological basis for the visual analysis conducted in this study.

Research Method

Research Approaches

This study employed a qualitative approach with visual analysis as the primary strategy. This qualitative approach was chosen due to the nature of the research object, which was a visual cultural artifact that required in-depth interpretation of its meanings, symbols, and narratives. Visual analysis was used to comprehensively examine the visual elements, narrative structure, and inter-scene relationships in Lil Nas X's music video for "J Christ."

Objects and Data Sources

The object of this research was the music video "J Christ" by Lil Nas X, which was officially uploaded to Lil Nas X's YouTube channel on January 12, 2024, with a duration of 2 minutes and 52 seconds. This video was a visual work directed by Gibson Hazard and produced under the label Columbia Records. Montero Lamar Hill, known by his stage name Lil Nas X, was the central figure in the video's visual narrative. The selection of this music video as the research object was based on its symbolic complexity and the controversy it raised regarding the use of religious symbols within the context of contemporary popular culture. The video was accessed through the official YouTube platform. The authenticity and integrity of the video as the research object were ensured through direct access from the artist's official channel, thus

ensuring that no modifications or edits affected the validity of the visual analysis conducted.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was conducted through systematic visual observation using close-viewing techniques, which consisted of four main stages including comprehensive viewing to understand the overall narrative structure, temporal segmentation based on significant scene changes, repeated detailed observation of each segment, and chronological documentation with accurate timestamps (minutes:seconds). Each relevant visual element was documented through screenshots to capture key visuals, descriptive recording of each scene according to Noël Carroll's principles that focused on what was visible without evaluative interpretation, an inventory of symbols and graphic elements that appeared on the screen, and recording of texts that appeared in the video, such as quotes, writings, and captions. The documentation also included an analysis of visual patterns and structures, including visual repetition patterns and recurring motifs, color transitions and atmospheric changes, changes in space and setting, and the overall visual narrative structure.

Data Analysis Framework

The data analysis framework of this research used an approach that began with a description stage to produce an objective inventory of each scene based on timestamps, including systematic recording of visual elements, settings, and text/symbol documentation. Next, the semiotic classification stage used Peirce's theory to categorize visual elements into icons, indexes, and symbols to identify their functions within the sign system. The meaning analysis stage applied Barthes's framework to examine denotative and connotative meanings, including the anchorage and relay functions in the construction of overall meaning. The iconoclasm analysis stage examined the practices of reversal, parody, and appropriation of religious symbols, focusing on strategies for deconstructing meaning and the implications for sacred-profane meanings in popular culture. Finally, the structural synthesis stage mapped the visual patterns and overall narrative structure by identifying recurring motifs and transitions of meaning to produce a coherent interpretation of the video as a work of contemporary visual art.

Data Validation Techniques

The data validation technique in this study applied a comprehensive triangulation approach to ensure the credibility and reliability of the analysis results. Validation was carried out through source triangulation by verifying descriptions through repeated video observations, confirming findings with literature on visual semiotics and iconoclasm theory, and comparing them with similar studies to position the research within a broader academic context. Furthermore, peer debriefing with colleagues served as an external validation mechanism to test the accuracy of visual descriptions and to verify sign classifications and interpretations of meaning, while avoiding subjective interpretation biases that might have arisen in the analysis. The entire validation process was systematically documented through an audit trail that recorded each step of the analysis, documented changes in interpretation, and justified methodological decisions, thereby enabling transparency, facilitating replication of the study, and providing a strong foundation for future follow-up research.

Research Limitations

This research has clear limitations in terms of the object and aspects of the study being studied. In terms of the object, the research limits the analysis to the official version of the music video "J Christ" with a duration of 2 minutes 52 seconds uploaded on Lil Nas X's official YouTube channel, without conducting comparisons with other works by the same artist or comparative analysis with similar music videos, thus allowing for an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of a single research object but limiting the possibility of generalizing

the findings to other works in the same genre or context. Meanwhile, in terms of the aspects of the study, the focus of the research is directed at the visual, symbolic, and narrative aspects of the music video by excluding discussions of the musical or performative aspects and not examining the public reception or social impact of the music video, but rather focusing on textual analysis of the work itself to ensure depth of analysis in the visual and symbolic dimensions of the work which is the main focus of the research.

Epistemological Position and Research Assumptions

This research is grounded in three epistemological assumptions. First, the constructionist assumption, which views the meaning of religious symbols as being constructed through socio-cultural contexts rather than being inherent, aligning with Barthes' theory of myth as a second-order signification. Second, the dialogic assumption, which considers music videos as cultural texts that engage in dialogue with religious traditions through intertextuality. Third, the researcher's position as an academic observer who acknowledges the subjectivity of interpretation, validated through triangulation and peer debriefing.

Results

This study elucidates the complexity of visual representation in Lil Nas X's "J Christ" music video through the lens of Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis. Key findings reveal the deliberate and systematic appropriation of religious symbols employed to construct a narrative of queer identity resurgence and theological reimagination. The visual analysis uncovers persistent iconoclastic motifs throughout the video, emphasizing the transformative re-signification of traditional Christian symbols as sites for articulating alternative and inclusive expressions of identity.

Chronological Description of Scenes Based on Official Video

1. Minutes 00:00–00:13
   The opening sequence features a group of figures dressed in white walking across a vast green meadow. The figures bear visual resemblance to public figures such as Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Oprah Winfrey, and Barack Obama. They move with positive expressions toward a staircase structure leading upward, visually representing the concept of heaven in Christian iconography. At the top of the stairs, Lil Nas X waits.

2. Minutes 00:13–00:20
   After the figures reach the top of the stairs, Lil Nas X is shown in a brightly lit room and encounters a figure representing Michael Jackson. The Michael Jackson representation is depicted as a heavenly presence who had already arrived at the location.

3. Minutes 00:20–00:36
   The narrative then transitions to a lower chamber that visually resembles a depiction of hell. Lil Nas X is positioned in front of a large container showing human hands protruding from it. The background features a statue with a horned demon head and symbols such as an inverted cross.

4. Minutes 00:36–00:44
   Symbols such as the inverted cross and the pentagram are prominently situated within the background visual composition, serving as potent theological signifiers that evoke complex connotations related to subversion, sacrilege, and alternative spiritualities.

5. Minutes 00:44–01:02
   Lil Nas X is involved in a basketball game against a figure representing the devil. The figure is wearing shoes from Lil Nas X's collaboration with MSCHF that contain controversial elements: the words "LUKE 10:18," a label with the number 666 and a serial

number, an inverted pentagram and an inverted cross, and a black-and-red color scheme.

6. Minutes 01:02–01:12
   Lil Nas X is depicted in a pose resembling a depiction of Jesus in the crucifixion scene. Before him, several figures in white robes perform dance moves.

7. Minutes 01:12–01:22
   The setting changes to a sheep farm, where Lil Nas X is shown sitting while shearing sheep.

8. Minutes 01:22–01:35
   Lil Nas X ascended the stairs while surrounded by paparazzi and journalists snapping photos. The visual atmosphere resembled a celebrity gala premiere.

9. Minutes 01:35–01:50
   The sequence shows a massive flood that submerges vehicles and surrounding buildings.

10. Minutes 01:50–02:10
    Lil Nas X dances with backup dancers amidst a storm and huge waves. He waves a flag with a satanic symbol. The text "Lord help me for I'm at water" appears on the screen. After the water recedes and the sun rises, the text "Day Zero: A New Beginning" appears.

11. Minutes 02:10–02:40
    Lil Nas X and the dancers are in a new post-flood landscape with a bright and fresh atmosphere.

12. Minutes 02:40–02:52
    A black screen displays a Bible verse from 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here."

Visual Structure and Key Elements

The analysis identified dominant visual elements that appeared repeatedly:

1. Green meadows, blue skies, and a stairway to heaven (00:00–00:13)
2. A lineup of celebrity figures (00:00–00:13)
3. A depiction of Michael Jackson in heaven (00:13–00:20)
4. A depiction of hell with a large pot, a devil statue, an inverted cross, and a pentagram (00:20–00:44)
5. A basketball game, Satan Shoes with "LUKE 10:18" written on them, the number 666, a pentagram, and an inverted cross (00:44–01:02)
6. A parody of the crucifixion (01:02–01:12)
7. A sheep farm setting (01:12–01:22)
8. A ladder with paparazzi (01:22–01:35)
9. The flood and references to the story of Noah (01:35–01:50)
10. Flags Satanic, text "Lord help me for I'm at water", "Day Zero" (01:50–02:10)
11. New post-flood landscape (02:10–02:40)
12. Bible verse quotation (02:40–02:52)

Visual Analysis Discussion

Celebrity Parade and the Construction of Queer Identity in Celestial Space (00:00–00:20)

The video's opening sequence presents a procession of white-clad figures traversing a pastoral landscape beneath a cerulean sky. By incorporating iconic public personages such as Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Oprah Winfrey, and Barack Obama, the narrative constructs an ethos of inclusivity that transcends conventional demographic and cultural demarcations. Their collective movement toward a vertically ascending white staircase functions within the

Christian semiotic system as a signifier of the celestial realm.

Lil Nas X appears at the top of the staircase wearing a white robe and a crown of thorns, flanked by figures that express gender fluidity. This deliberately challenges Christian symbolism by recontextualizing sacred imagery to argue that religious symbols, like gender norms, are social constructions rather than divine decrees. For orthodox Christians who uphold the authority of the Bible, this represents a fundamental rejection of biblical teachings on human nature, sexuality, and Christ's redemptive suffering, replacing the gospel's call to transformation with the celebration of alternative identities.

The portrayal of Michael Jackson in the heavenly space (00:13–00:20) further reinforces the discourse of cultural legitimacy and heritage continuity. As a global icon who similarly navigated complex identity controversies, Jackson is invoked as a spiritual and artistic predecessor, thereby validating Lil Nas X's own claim to prominence within the hierarchy of popular culture. The visual parity between the two figures signals a reciprocal recognition and asserts a shared lineage in contemporary musical discourse.

Iconoclasm and the Reversal of Religious Symbols (00:20–00:44)

The transition from a heavenly space to a depiction of hell demonstrates a fundamental dichotomy in the video's narrative structure. The dark space, dominated by red and black, creates an explicit visual contrast with the preceding sequence. Lil Nas X is positioned in front of a large container with outstretched human hands, creating imagery that references representations of suffering in traditional Christian iconography. In this context, the crown of thorns is reconfigured not merely as a symbol of queer resurrection, but as a critical challenge to social norms about gender and sexuality that have historically marginalized queer bodies within religious spaces. Through the appropriation of this sacred symbol, the visual narrative argues that such norms are social constructions rather than fixed divine dogma. This line of reasoning impacts Christian faith by recontextualizing biblical theology concerning suffering and glorification, particularly referencing the promise of a "new creation," to imply that redemption is accessible to all identities. Thus, the aim is to expand theological imagination by asserting that queer experience is not in conflict with, but rather compatible with, the spiritual journey of death and rebirth found in the Bible.

The presence of a statue of a horned demon head, an inverted cross, and a pentagram in the visual composition demonstrates a systematic practice of iconoclasm. Within the context of Barthes's semiotics, these symbols undergo a process of mythologization in which their conventional meaning (the cross as a symbol of salvation) is inverted into a symbol of rebellion and resistance. This practice is not merely destructive, but rather a constructive strategy for constructing alternative systems of meaning. This is highly important because without such an inclusive framework, religious symbols risk remaining static instruments of division. By democratizing these symbols, this work encourages meaningful cultural dialogue, reduces social polarization, and validates the spiritual existence of marginalized communities. In the context of 2025, where much queer-religious content is suppressed by platform moderation, this kind of visual reclamation becomes essential for visibility and identity affirmation.
The visual repetition of these symbols in subsequent sequences reinforces their function as consistent visual motifs, creating narrative coherence that supports the themes of identity transformation and resistance.

Controversial Objectification through Satan Shoes (00:44–01:02)

The basketball match sequence between Lil Nas X and a depiction of the devil features Satan Shoes as a significant visual object. These shoes are not merely props, but cultural artifacts containing complex symbolic meanings and social controversies. The inscription "LUKE 10:18" refers to the biblical verse about Satan's fall: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven," while the number 666 and the pentagram reinforce the associative meaning with satanic symbolism. From a semiotic perspective, Satan Shoes function as a sign undergoing a process of resignification. An everyday object (shoes) is transformed into a medium for identity expression

and political resistance. The decision to feature this controversial object in the video demonstrates a provocative aesthetic strategy aimed at creating discourse and visibility for queer identity.
The basketball match itself can be interpreted as a metaphor for the competition between traditional and progressive values, where symbolic victory is achieved through the appropriation and transformation of symbols previously considered taboo.

Reinterpretation of the Crucifixion Narrative (01:02–01:12)
The video's depiction of the crucifixion demonstrates the most explicit appropriation of the central Christian narrative. Lil Nas X poses himself in a pose resembling the crucified Christ, while white-robed figures dance around him. This transformation transforms the crucifixion from a moment of suffering and sacrifice into a space of expression and celebration.
Within the context of queer theory, this reinterpretation can be understood as a reclaiming of narratives historically used to exclude and discriminate against queer identities. The crucifixion, as the ultimate sacrifice in Christian tradition, is transformed into the ultimate expression of a suppressed identity. The dancing movements of the white-robed figures reinforce the celebratory and liberatory dimensions of this reinterpretation.

Pastoral Allegory and the Concept of Redemption (01:12–01:22)
The sheep farm setting presents a pastoral allegory rich with biblical references. Sheep, in Christian tradition, represent people in need of guidance and redemption. Lil Nas X, positioned in the act of shearing sheep, takes on the role of shepherd, providing care and transformation. This reinterpretation shifts the concept of redemption from a traditional religious framework to a queer identity framework. Redemption is no longer understood as spiritual salvation, but as liberation from norms that limit identity expression. Lil Nas X positions himself as a redeemer for the queer community, offering an alternative narrative about who can give and receive redemption.

Media Spectacle and Celebrity Construction (01:22–01:35)
The staircase sequence featuring paparazzi and journalists creates a commentary on the culture of spectacle in the entertainment industry. Lil Nas X climbs the stairs while surrounded by cameras and media spotlights, creating familiar imagery within the context of celebrity culture. The stairs, as a recurring visual motif, reinforce the themes of ascension and achievement.
From a media studies perspective, this sequence can be interpreted as a meta-commentary on the relationship between controversy, visibility, and success in the music industry. The presence of paparazzi demonstrates that provocative and controversial content are strategies to maintain public attention and cultural relevance.

Apocalyptic Narrative and Regeneration (01:35–02:10)
The flood sequence makes explicit reference to the Noahide narrative in the Abrahamic religions. The flood functions as both an agent of destruction and purification, creating a tabula rasa for a new beginning. In the context of the video, the flood represents the destruction of the old order and the emergence of a new paradigm.
The texts "Lord help me for I'm at water" and "Day Zero: A New Beginning" serve as anchorages in Barthes's terminology, providing anchoring meaning to the ambiguous visual imagery. The satanic flag raised amidst the storm demonstrates the persistence of identity and values even in times of crisis and transformation.
The dance moves performed by Lil Nas X and his backup dancers amidst the storm reinforce the themes of resilience and celebration in the face of adversity. The transition from storm to clear skies signifies successful transformation and the emergence of a new world order.

New Landscape and Collective Celebration (02:10–02:40)
The new post-flood landscape is characterized by brightness, freshness, and optimism. Pastel colors and soft lighting create a significant contrast to the darkness and intensity of the previous sequences. Lil Nas X and the dancers engage in a collective celebration, demonstrating the

successful realization of the transformation process.
This victory parade represents the culmination of the journey that began with the celebrity parade at the beginning of the video. This cyclical structure reinforces the themes of regeneration and continuity, demonstrating that transformation is a continuous and collective process.

Theological Anchoring and Textual Legitimacy (02:40–02:52)
The biblical quotation from 2 Corinthians 5:17 serves as the ultimate anchor, providing theological legitimacy to the entire narrative. This verse explicitly emphasizes the themes of transformation and new creation, providing a biblical foundation for the appropriation and reinterpretation that occur throughout the video.
The use of biblical text as a closing verse demonstrates a sophisticated legitimation strategy, grounding controversial content within authoritative religious texts. This creates a productive tension between transgression and tradition, suggesting that transformation can occur within existing frameworks rather than completely outside them. A visual analysis of the "J Christ" video reveals the complexity of the semiotic strategies Lil Nas X uses to construct a narrative of queer identity resurgence through the appropriation and transformation of traditional religious symbols. The systematic use of iconoclasm, combined with careful anchorage through biblical texts and references, creates a discourse that is simultaneously transgressive and legitimizing. This video demonstrates how popular culture can become a site of negotiation between tradition and innovation, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, in the context of contemporary identity politics.

Meanwhile, for Christianity itself, this study shows that the faith is facing a critical juncture in the digital age. The video challenges the Church to distinguish between divine truth and socially constructed exclusion. This implies that for Christian symbols to remain relevant in a pluralistic society, they must be fluid enough to embrace the spiritual longings of marginalized communities. The impact on faith is a call to move from rigid legalism toward a Spirit-led inclusivity (2 Corinthians 3:6), recognizing that the *imago Dei* is also reflected in queer bodies.

Discussions

Lil Nas X's music video for "J Christ" (2024) occupies a significant place in the contemporary visual arts landscape as an object of study that blends religious symbolism and pop culture. This work functions as a contested field for meaning, identity, and interpretation in the global public sphere. This discussion deepens the visual analysis by examining the transformation of symbols, patterns of repetition, practices of iconoclasm, and analyzing public responses, impacts on queer discourse, and theoretical reflections.

Transformation and Negotiation of Symbolic Meaning

Appropriation of Religious Symbols: The religious symbols in "J Christ", the crown of thorns, the cross, the lamb, the flood, the parade of angels, undergo a process of deconstruction from their conventionally significant functions. Barthes (1977) explains that symbols do not have inherent meaning but are constructed through changeable cultural conventions. It is important to emphasize that this appropriation does not erase the inherent Christian meaning of the symbol, the cross still represents the crucifixion of Christ in its Barthesian denotation. However, through an iconoclastic strategy, a new layer of connotation is added: the cross becomes a polyvalent symbol that simultaneously maintains its historical theological significance and gains new resonance as a marker of queer rising. This is a process of additive signification, not substitution, enriching rather than replacing the traditional meaning. Lil Nas X implements strategies of appropriation, inversion, and parody of these symbols, resulting in a polysemy of meaning open to interpretive negotiation. The crown of thorns, as a signifier, undergoes a connotative transformation from a symbol of Christ's suffering (traditional meaning) to a symbol of queer resurrection (alternative meaning). This process follows the mechanism described by Jungle (1997) regarding "preferred reading" versus "oppositional reading," in which the queer

community engages in oppositional readings of dominant religious symbols.
Contemporary Iconoclasm Strategy: The inverted cross, the pentagram, and the recurring number 666 do not function solely as signifiers of Satanism, but rather as counter-discourse against exclusive religious authority. Iconoclasm is a practice of symbolic destruction aimed at dismantling the power of dominant meanings (Ejaz & Jeckker, 2025; Fraser, 2022). In this context, iconoclasm becomes a visual strategy to open up a more inclusive and progressive space for interpretation.

Repetition Patterns and Visual Narrative Structure

In Barthesian semiotics, a sign system can be understood as a syntagmatic chain in which repeated motifs or symbols combine to structure the visual narrative and generate meaning for one or an audience. Elements such as celebrity parades, queer angels, crowns of thorns, inverted crosses, pentagrams, lambs, floodwaters, satanic flags, and anchorage texts appear consistently with measured frequency. This repetition follows the Barthesian principle of building a system of signs that reinforce and contradict each other, creating a complex web of meaning (Barthes, 1977). Transformative Narrative Structure: The visual narrative structure follows an archetypal journey pattern from heaven to hell, suffering to victory, crisis to rebirth. Each spatial transition marks a change in ontological status and identity transformation. Lil Nas X functions as a guide narrator and subjected protagonist who actively constructs a narrative of queer awakening in the context of social polarization.

The Practice of Iconoclasm and Social Criticism

The video's symbolic deconstruction, in the form of iconoclasm practices, follows Latour and Weibel's (2002) typology of "iconoclash", the conflict between the destruction and creation of meaning. The inverted cross, the parodied crucifixion, the queer angel parade, and the raising of the satanic flag are manifestations of destructive creativity aimed at creating alternative, more inclusive meanings. The critique of the media spectacle, namely paparazzi scenes, gala premieres, and camera flashes, implements Debord's (1992) concept of the "society of the spectacle." Lil Nas X positions himself as a subject who critiques sensational culture and the entertainment industry, while still affirming a narrative of queer triumph that does not depend on the validation of dominant institutions.

Public Response: Polarization, Controversy, and Virality

Public response to "J Christ" showed significant polarization based on the ideological positioning and cultural background of the audience. As of December 12, 2025, the video has 26 million views and 105,636 comments on YouTube. Public responses are polarized between criticism and support, although negative comments have predominated so far. Discussions have also emerged on various platforms such as Reddit and on social media like X, where the keyword “Lil Nas J Christ” continues to generate considerable debate. In addition, several online religious magazines, including Premier Christianity and Religion Unplugged, have also provided commentary.

Referring to Stuart Hall's (1980) reception theory, there are three categories of reading: Dominant Reading: Rejection from conservative and religious communities who interpret the video as a blasphemy of sacred symbols. Negotiated Reading: Audiences who acknowledge the artistic value but question the symbolic approach. Oppositional Reading: Queer communities and supporters of freedom of expression who celebrate the boldness of the representation. Viral Culture and Amplification of Meaning: The virality of the video follows the mechanism described by Shifman (2013) about "viral culture," where controversial content is amplified through participatory culture. The polarization of responses actually strengthens circulation and emphasizes the role of art as an arena for negotiating meaning.

Impact on Queer Discourse: Representation, Resistance, and the Birth of New Narratives

Queering the Canon: The scene in this video implements the strategy of "queering the canon" conceptualized by Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990). Lil Nas X appropriates a symbolic legacy that has been exclusive and heteronormative, demanding representational space within the dominant cultural narrative. The transformation of Queer Identity in the form of a Parade of queer angels, the redemption of the lamb, and the victory at the end of the video serve as visual metaphors for the process of acceptance, courage, and identity transformation. In the context of queer theory, this video becomes a cultural artifact that encourages discussion about the relationship between religion and queer identity, opening up opportunities for a more fluid and personal interpretation of spirituality. Within the framework of queer theory, this video serves as a cultural artifact that encourages discussion about the relationship between religion and queer identity, opening opportunities for a more fluid and personal interpretation of spirituality. From a Christian perspective, this fluidity is necessary to move beyond rigid legalism that has historically marginalized certain communities. This aligns with the biblical distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law as stated in 2 Corinthians 3:6, "the written law kills, but the Spirit gives life," indicating that a true experience of faith requires a direct and transformative relationship with the Divine that transcends exclusive institutional boundaries.

Theoretical Reflections: Semiology, Iconoclasm, and New Interpretive Spaces

The Effectiveness of the Semiotic Approach "J Christ" validates the effectiveness of Barthes' visual semiotic approach in dissecting contemporary artworks. The distinction between denotation and connotation, as well as the analysis of anchorage functions, demonstrate that visual meaning is never singular but always in a process of contestation and negotiation. Peirce's classification of signs (icon, index, symbol) provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the complexity of visual meaning-making. Democratization of Interpretation, This video illustrates that in digital visual culture, control of meaning is no longer in the hands of a single institution, but is distributed within a diverse network of communities, ideologies, and experiences. The practice of iconoclasm in "J Christ" functions as a strategy for building a more inclusive and reflective interpretative space.

Socio-Cultural and Aesthetic Implications

The transformation of the representation paradigm and its theological implications regarding this study transcends the domain of pure aesthetics by positioning “J Christ” as a critical reflection on the intricate relationship between religion, art, and identity within a visual culture increasingly marked by social polarization. The music video constitutes a significant exemplar of contemporary iconoclasm, wherein the deconstruction of entrenched religious meanings serves as the foundational act for generating new interpretive frameworks that are more inclusive of diverse identities and experiences. This is highly important because without such an inclusive framework, religious symbols risk remaining static instruments of division. By democratizing these symbols, this work encourages meaningful cultural dialogue, reduces social polarization, and validates the spiritual existence of marginalized communities. In the context of 2025, where much queer-religious content is suppressed by platform moderation, this kind of visual reclamation becomes essential for visibility and identity affirmation.

Visual analysis grounded in Barthes’s semiotic theory, reinforced by Peirce’s triadic framework and informed by the critical lens of iconoclasm, has demonstrated efficacy in elucidating the transformation of symbols and cultural narratives in contemporary popular artworks. This interdisciplinary approach equips scholars with robust analytical tools applicable to analogous inquiries within cultural studies, visual theology, and religious visual culture.

“J Christ” has catalyzed widespread public discourse across social media platforms, religious

forums, and queer communities, centering debates on the boundaries of freedom of expression, the hermeneutics of religious symbolism, and the politics of identity representation. The ensuing controversy affirms that contemporary visual art functions not only as a site for negotiating contested meanings but also as a vital arena for collective learning and theological engagement within pluralistic societies.

Conclusions

Lil Nas X's "J Christ" is more than a provocative pop culture artifact; it functions as a sophisticated theological intervention. By revisiting the central thesis with new insights, this study concludes that the iconoclasm in the video is not an act of erasure but a form of resurrection. The study employs a concept of destructive creativity to argue that the sacredness of Christian symbols is not diminished when engaged by queer identities but is instead expanded. The narrative arc, from the celebrity staircase to the post-flood renewal, logically constructs a visual theology in which the "new creation" promised in 2 Corinthians 5:17 explicitly includes those historically regarded as abominations.

Regarding implications for Christian faith, this study shows that Christianity faces a critical juncture in the digital age. The video challenges the Church to distinguish between divine truth and socially constructed exclusion. This implies that for Christian symbols to remain relevant in a pluralistic society, they must be sufficiently fluid to embrace the spiritual longings of marginalized communities. The impact on faith is a call to move from rigid legalism toward Spirit-led inclusivity, recognizing that the imago Dei is also reflected in queer bodies.

The strengths of this study lie in the rigorous application of Barthes' semiotics and iconoclasm theory to unpack the complex visual layers that are often dismissed as mere spectacle. However, the study has limitations. It focuses primarily on the textual analysis of a single visual work, which restricts the generalization of findings to the broader genre of queer pop-theological media. Furthermore, by excluding audience reception analysis, the study does not measure how these theological reinterpretations are actually internalized or resisted by Christian and queer audiences directly.

This study opens several avenues for future research. Scholars need to investigate how diverse Christian denominations, from progressive to conservative, cognitively process these subversive symbols. In addition, it is important to analyze whether digital iconoclasm leads to genuine theological reform or further deepens polarization. Future research should also expand into comparative studies to examine how other artists in non-Western contexts negotiate religious symbolism. It is necessary to consider whether digital subversion of sacred icons can function as a legitimate catalyst for doctrinal reform or remain a permanent countercultural practice. Addressing these questions is essential for understanding the evolving relationship between popular culture and sacred traditions.

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