Dope and diamonds
Dope and diamonds
D i a m o n d s
Dope and diamonds
Dope and diamonds
That's all I want
Dope and diamonds
Dope and diamonds
D i a m o n d s
Dope and diamonds
Dope and diamonds

A Lana del Rey Reader

Dope and diamonds

A Lana del Rey Reader

Introduction

"What if her pussy tastes like Pepsi cola? And if all she wants is dope and diamonds, so what? What if the most radical – fuck it, feminist – thing you can do is believe everything a girl says about her life, whether or not you like it?"

In her essay The Fake As More, reproduced here from a supplement in *The New Inquiry*, July 2014, Sarah Nicole Prickett asks us to consider the idea that, despite endless accusations of affectation and fakery, Lana Del Rey might be extremely real indeed. This bootleg collection pursues that premise.

Lana Del Rey embodies many things that women are not supposed to be. Like Ottessa Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, she's tragic and banal. As Ariel Levy describes, "Moshfegh's characters tend to be amoral, frank, bleakly funny, very smart, and perverse in their motivations, in ways that destabilise the reader's assumptions about what is ugly, what is desirable, what is permissible, and what is real". Lana is ugly and desirable. In her lyrics and self-conceived music videos, she reinforces a range of problematic, outmoded and damaging female stereotypes. Her narratives glamourise objectification and the accumulation of wealth, alongside female financial disempowerment, assault and abuse. She prioritises boys on bikes and ignores her friends, if she even has any: while she might, in *Video Games*, describe "watching all our friends fall in and out of Old Paul's", she definitely means "his" friends. Her protagonists don't run the world, they are not independent women and they are not doing it for themselves. Instead they defer to a selection of fathers and boyfriends, drug addicts and pimps, priests and police officers; being held down is a turn on.

Lana is variously lethargic and confrontational, vulgar yet deeply sensitive. Her contradictions are rehearsed and precise. She also represents a nuanced, vulnerable and flawed femininity rarely explored in contemporary pop, exposing the emptiness and hypocrisy of sloganistic corporate feminism, of the arbitrary codes of sisterhood, and

the regime of empowerment and keeping it real. She's both obvious and ambiguous, campy and earnest; her metaphors are as grandiose and predictable as a self-conscious freshman. She constructs a visual language of images that have been sold to us for decades, twists them round her little finger and throws them back at us, with a wink reflected in the wing mirror of her boyfriend's truck. Maybe we're giving her too much credit, but maybe we're not giving her enough?

As "empowerment" and "authenticity" have become the default message of the female pop star—from the Spice Girls' *Girl Power*, to Beyonce's, well, everything, through to Pink, Ke$ha, Katy Perry and Taylor Swift—instead Lana's plaintive "God knows I tried" somehow feels less barren than the promise that "We run this motherfucking world". Lana exemplifies the contrariness of empowerment under capitalism. In *Pretty When You Cry*, Lindsay Zoladz writes of Katy Perry's Roar: "I like the song, but I also sort of feel like a Pavlovian dog for liking it... [it] feels like it was drawn up from focus groups and genetically engineered in a laboratory for the sole purpose of EMPOWERING ME." She argues that Ultraviolence provides a sort-of antidote, "a fantasy of leisure" that explicitly rejects wellness and self-betterment: "The people in Del Rey's musical universe do not strive or believe that things will get better, they lounge around all day manicuring their nails and then drink and smoke themselves into a glamorously inert stupor by night." Lana doesn't offer a solution, but she does offer an alternative that involves getting high. She's not unlike one of the other great female misanthropes, *Jackie Brown*'s Melanie:

Ordell: I'm serious, you smoke too much of that shit. That shit robs you of your ambition.

Melanie: Not if your ambition is to get high and watch TV.

Of course, misanthropy and morbidity have long been the preserve of white, male authors and white, male characters – flawed and dissociated, reprehensible and adored. In J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield hopes to hell "that when I die somebody has the sense to just dump me in the river or something". *In The People Look Like Flowers At Last*, Charles Bukowski claims that "You have to die a few times before you can really live". In *On the Road*, Kerouac describes how "My whole wretched life swam before my weary eyes, and I realised no matter what you do it's bound to be a waste of time in the end so you might as well go mad". It's a wonder Lana del Rey has never sung "I'm not brave any more darling. I'm all broken. They've broken me."

It's Lana's dream logic that provides the closest thing to clarity; her use of repetition, of tired cliches, disordered timelines and mixed messages is consistent, and reminiscent of the confused narratives we construct in our subconscious and retell with the static fuzz

of days-old news. Her vision of California, of glamour and love, fame and anguish—like her use of clumsily try-hard references, to Vladimir Nabokov and David Bowie—is evocative of Cher-Horowitz-dumb: "Duh, it's like a famous quote!" But *Clueless*, too, was written and directed by a woman, and Horowitz, like Lana, is self-satisfied and clever. Sex preoccupies both, yet feminism is arrived at almost by accident.

When Lana was accused of only getting successful because of an industry boyfriend, she doubled down and wrote *Fucked My Way Up To The Top*. While pushing sexuality through a range of passé stereotypes, she ended up presenting as more empowered than ostensibly feminist pop stars proclaiming full emancipation over an off-the-shelf backing track. Sure, she's a mess of smokescreens, but tell us what isn't? Lana's feedback loop of lacklustre imagery—taking her red dress off, putting her little red dress on, wishing she was dead, wishing she was dead already—adds up to a sort of refreshing shamelessness: fresh out of fucks forever.

SDS, who in 1969 decided to demonstrate their revolutionary credentials by labeling G.I.s "pigs"—which only reinforced their pariah status in the antiwar community.)

Memory is unreliable, which is why historians prefer documents—like the actual television footage that Burns and Novick use to illustrate their story about what awaited returning veterans at Travis. It does not show protesters engaged in violent or confrontational activities. What it shows is a group of antiwar protesters standing peacefully on the sidewalk outside of an airport with placards and leaflets. The image is at odds with the narrative. One of the protesters is wearing a T-shirt that clearly reads "Active Duty G.I.s Against the War." From the mid-1960s on, antiwar protesters like this group, and like myself, regarded returning Vietnam veterans as potential allies, and the movement as a whole increasingly made efforts to reach out to them. That's what is happening in this particular footage. Unlike their treatment of the war, which draws heavily on the historical record, like the Pentagon Papers, as well as personal memory, Burns and Novick prefer anecdotes in their characterization of the antiwar movement. But the record is out there, if they had only gone looking for it. News of G.I. and veteran protests filled antiwar publications. A network of antiwar G.I. coffee houses, supported by the civilian antiwar movement, grew up around military bases. By 1971 Vietnam Veterans Against the War was the cutting edge of the antiwar movement—and also the most vocal in publicizing and condemning American atrocities, including the killing of civilians, in the war.

The baby-killer taunt is a good example of a "zombie lie" (a lie that won't die no matter how many times it's refuted), and the worst thing I can say about the Burns and Novick series is that it practically guarantees this particular zombie will remain undead. It goes hand-in-hand with another myth that Burns and Novick might have subjected to critical investigation and help dispel, but chose not to. As Holy Cross sociologist Jerry Lembcke, himself a Vietnam veteran, shows in his 1998 book *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, there is *no* contemporary evidence (newspaper, magazine, or television news accounts) of antiwar protesters ever spitting on a returning veteran. It was only fifteen or twenty years later, following the release of the Rambo movies (sample dialogue: "Then I come back to the world [from Vietnam] and I see all those maggots at the airport . . . Spitting. Calling me baby-killer . . .") that the notion that antiwar protesters spent long hours lurking around air bases hoping to harass and dishonor returning veterans took off in right-wing lore. Lembcke is still around, still writing about the treatment of veterans on their return from Vietnam. Why wasn't he invited to be a witness in the series?

To be fair, Burns and Novick had a complicated history to recount; they would need at least another eighteen hours to do justice to every story worth telling about the Vietnam War (and even that might not be enough). But they made choices about the story they wanted to tell. They chose to paint the antiwar movement of the 1960s and 1970s in an unflattering light, when in fact this movement, veterans and non-veterans alike, was the only truly redemptive story to come out of the Vietnam War.

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Lana Del Rey's America

Kate Aronoff

More than halfway through her Billboard topping latest album, *Lust for Life*, Lana Del Rey wonders, "Is this the end of an era / Is this the end of America?"

On one level, the line is typical Lana Del Rey. The persona she's developed over the last decade has been defined by sad, nihilistic songs that revolve in one way or another around death, bad boyfriends, and Americana—sometimes all three at once, and always painted in a thick, tacky coat of nostalgia. "I'm in love with a dying man," she sang as Lizzy Grant on her 2008 EP *Kill Kill*, less than three years before she became Lana Del Rey, an internet sensation

Lana Del Rey performing in 2013. Photo by Beatriz Alvani.

turned award-winning pop star. "Dear lord, when I get to heaven," she prayed over a full orchestra on "Young and Beautiful," her contribution to the 2013 *Great Gatsby* soundtrack, "please let me bring my man." As in that story, death is just around the corner in Del Rey's version of the American dream. When it does come, that end will be as tragic as it is garish—never less so than in the Trump era, where violence and gold plating go hand in hand.

Lust for Life is plenty sad—it wouldn't be a Lana Dey Rey record if it weren't. But it might also be her most upbeat production yet, announced by the fact that she's traded her well-known scowl on this cover for an earnest, toothy smile. She even put some flowers in her hair.

Following early failure as a young musician, New York City–born Elizabeth Grant transformed herself into Lana Del Rey shortly before her breakout hit, "Video Games," went viral with a homemade video and slow, catchy song about a love that's as boring as it is obsessive, singing vacantly, "it's you / it's you / it's all for you" to a man more interested in his Playstation than her affection. Sparse at first, then gradually swelling, the orchestra meets Del Rey's deadpan voice as she hums, "Heaven is a place on earth with you . . . I heard that you like the bad girls honey, is that true?" She's been criticized since then for lacking authenticity, with detractors arguing that she's too plastic and was set up for commercial success by her wealthy and well-connected family. (Del Rey's parents met while working at a major New York advertising firm, and her father went on to make millions selling web domain names after the family moved away from the city.) She dealt with the flack mainly by casting off the idea that authenticity is even possible in modern pop music, leaning hard into her dark and campy trademarks, and never cowing to the haters.

Her four albums have given us lyrics like, "My pussy tastes like Pepsi Cola" and "I'm pretty when I cry"; she begins "Fucked My Way Up To The Top" with the line "Life is awesome, I confess," only to rhyme it with another about passing an STI test. *Ultraviolence* (2014) took a darker-than-usual turn even for Del Rey, exploring the depths of how brutal a relationship between two people can get. The title track gives us one of her more controversial lyrics, albeit borrowed from the sixties girl group the Crystals: "He hit me and it felt like a kiss."

Many of the songs on *Lust for Life*—soaring, debauched ballads about relationships gone sour with men who were probably rotten from the jump—continue in this same vein. If *Lust for Life* is her most cheery album, it's also her most on-brand. There's no more classic Lana Del Rey scene than her wandering "13 Beaches" (track three) in search of one where she can mourn a boy alone. (The song makes a nice companion to "High By The Beach," off her last album; in the video, Del Rey mopes and writhes uncomfortably around a sparsely decorated shore house before finally shooting down a helicopter full of paparazzi with a bazooka.) Another track—"White Mustang"—finds her characteristically pining the titular car of a guy who may or may not be a murderer. The difference now seems to be that she's more visibly in on the joke, admitting just how Peak Lana a line like "making love while I'm making good money" is. After all, as she reminds us in the chorus, "Who's doper than this bitch? Who's free-er than me?"

Amid all the brash hedonism and the relationship melodrama, Del Rey always finds an excuse to drape herself in the American flag, whether casting longtime collaborator A$AP Rocky as the JFK to her Jackie in the video for "National Anthem" or enjoining listeners to "Be young, be dope, be proud / Like an American." "My eyes are wide like cherry pies," she continues on "Cola," over a string section, spaghetti-Western guitars, and a club-friendly throb. "I fall asleep with an American flag."

Del Rey's career-long interest in Americana is part of what separates her out from the pack of newly woke celebrities. It hasn't been uncommon in the months since the election for pop stars to voice their opposition to Trump, and in some ways Del Rey's most recent work is part of that trend. One difference between her and the likes of Katy Perry and Lorde, though—pop darlings who've issued anti-Trump missives on Twitter and in sporadic interviews—lies in how well Del Rey's larger artistic project lends itself to this political awakening.

Part of that difference may stem from the fact that Del Rey's stardom has never been dependent on chart-topping hits, her songs a few shades too dark for radio. With the possible exception of "Video Games," her greatest commercial success was a club remix of "Summertime Sadness," a revved-up rendition of a standard LDR lost-love ballad. Distance from the top of the charts has granted Del Rey a bit more space to develop her vision at album length, playing around with broader themes without the pressure of punctuating them with hit singles. Consequently, she's famous more for her general mood and aesthetic than any one song. That's put her less in the spotlight than other stars, allowing her to maintain a relatively elusive, low-key public persona—perhaps also because, at thirty-two, she's more worldly than contemporaries like the twenty-one-year-old Lorde.

Rather than trying to score points with political statements, what *Lust for Life* touches on is something deeper, as she tries to reconcile her fictional America with the one we're all living in. In her lengthy 2012 video for "Ride," she narrated mournfully, "I believe in the country America used to be." She loves her country, but it's always been messy. The monologue ends:

> I believe in the freedom of the open road. And my motto is the same as ever: "I believe in the kindness of strangers. And when I'm at war with myself I ride, I just ride."
>
> Who are you? Are you in touch with all of your darkest fantasies? Have you created a life for yourself where you can experience them?
>
> I have. I am fucking crazy. But I am free.

Del Rey's America was always a kind of dystopia—a bubblegum pastiche, except peopled by lecherous old bikers and drug addictions and bad boyfriends who stalk her through beaches and deserts and stifling small towns. America is as much a character in her work as a setting, shaping and stealing scenes. What's made her brand of Americana endearing to many is that it manages to be enthusiastic about the idea of America while filtering its reality through enough hazy nostalgia

to wipe out any notion that she's talking about a country that actually exists—or ever did. "Affectless without irony, full of pop-symbolism that refuses to signify," the *New Inquiry*'s Ayesha Siddiqi wrote of Del Rey's work, "perhaps an American culture drained of all moral qualities or ethical commitments is worth holding onto."

With Trump's election, the bleak, kitschy America Del Rey holds onto has acquired another layer. Trumplandia has made her rethink her patriotism, in other words, but not abandon it. In an interview with *Pitchfork,* the singer said she would stop flying the stars and stripes behind her when performing "Born to Die," the title track off her first album. On Twitter, she's voiced her enthusiastic support in the last few months for everything from the March for Science to a binding spell against Trump, meant to prevent him from doing harm.

Some of Del Rey's contemporaries have no doubt been quicker to channel their newfound politics into a catchy protest anthem or a bombastic quote. Perry, for instance, credited Trump in June with her sexual liberation: "I was retriggered by a big male that didn't see women as equal," she told the *New York Times*. "I went to that dark place that I had been avoiding, and I dug out the mold"—returning the male gaze with defiance.

Del Rey, who has made a career more or less accepting the male gaze's role in modern pop, is less concerned with the symbolism of Trump than in the consequences of his reign. She's caught flack in the past for calling Tesla more interesting than feminism, but recent attacks from the federal level on Planned Parenthood have made her see sexism in a more explicitly political light. She was inspired enough by the Women's March to devote a song to it.

Yet while toxic relationships have animated large parts of Del Rey's past albums, she doesn't make the perhaps obvious move of subbing those bad boyfriends out for Trump, or even for America writ large. Nor does she adopt the now-clichéd line that he's gaslighting America or somehow re-enacting the other traits of abusive male lovers. Her sadness on *Lust for Life* is more sweeping, grappling with what it means to love a country gnarled into something she doesn't quite recognize.

That millions of Americans are involved in a collective mourning process over Trump's election seems to have freed Del Rey's songs from the confines of destructive interpersonal relationships, allowing her the space to talk about what's wrong with the rest of the world. With a few exceptions, love interests in *Lust for Life*'s more political tracks are mostly demoted to narrative devices. Where at times the men in her songs have sounded more like bosses than boyfriends, her digs tended to limit themselves to the power dynamics between individuals. If there's any twisted relationship at the heart of this album, it's between her and the country she's spent the better part of her career celebrating.

Where Del Rey's zeal for America has in the past been animated by a series of symbols—flags, cars, bourbon, and Budweiser—what seems to excite her most now are Americans themselves, from participants in the Women's March ("God Bless America—And All The Beautiful Women In It") to the festival kids making the best of life in an increasingly unstable world. There are still bad boyfriends, of course, but there's also fun and uncomplicated love, of the steamy variety found in "Lust for Life" (featuring the Weeknd) and innocent "Love," about finding solace in one another even as the world crumbles around them, "cause it's enough to be young and in love."

Over the course of *Lust for Life*, her biggest battle seems to be between escapism and a desire to see some version of the American dream fully realized. "When there were the women's marches, I was writing about that," she told collaborator Stevie Nicks in an ethereal *V* Magazine conversation between the two. "There was enough space in my mind to really absorb everything. I think I was very much in the mix of culture in California over the last five years, but it feels good to feel more connected to a wider world." In the resulting track, she cheers on marchers: "May you stand proud and strong / Like Lady Liberty shining all night long / God bless America."

In "Coachella—Woodstock In My Mind," she reflects on the feeling of being at the Southern California music festival and waking up to news of escalating tensions between the United States and North Korea. She's older and more reflective,

looking out for the future generations in her audience and seeing herself in them: "'Cause what about all these children / And what about all their parents / And what about about all their crowns they wear / In hair so long like mine." What would each of them do in the event that tensions between Trump and Kim Jong-un reach some catastrophic breaking point?

For Del Rey, the fact that she's spent the better part of her career embracing death contributes to the sense that she's already come to a kind of spiritual acceptance with nuclear war and whatever other horrors the Trump administration might bring. But now she's interested in doing *something* about her circumstances, even if she's not entirely sure what that might be. "Lately I've been thinking it's just someone else's job to care / Who am I to sympathize when no one gave a damn," she stews, before admitting that "Change is a powerful thing / I feel it coming in me." Somewhere between *Born to Die* and *Lust for Life*, she's realized we all might have to step up if we want to have anything to hang on to at all.

But for now, it's still the escapism that wins out. As long as Trump's in power, Del Rey's got a prescription for how to deal with the emotional wreckage wrought by his administration: keep dancing and keep fucking. Sex and pleasure are usually intertwined with sadness for Del Rey, but more than on any other album, *Lust for Life* parses out love and happiness from manipulative relationships. If the world is crashing down around us, then let's enjoy the cheap, dirty pleasures we've got.

Even while contemplating the end of empire, *Lust for Life* manages to fit in its share of pure fun. Del Rey isn't resigned to watching the world burn, but wants us to enjoy ourselves so long as we're caught in the fire. It's in that resilient, youthful Americana that she sees hope for the country's future.

Is it the end of America? "No," Del Rey urges, phoenix-like. "It's only the beginning."

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Death, beauty, and iconoclastic nostalgia: Precarious aesthetics and Lana Del Rey

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Abstract

The obsolescence of analogue media along with a rapid succession of digital formats has sensitised us to the mortality of media. It has also spawned what Dominik Schrey has called 'a golden age of nostalgia for these allegedly "dead media"', now explored by visual artists, filmmakers, cinematographers, Do-It-Yourself enthusiasts, Polaroid fans, Instagram users, music video directors and others. Since the mid-1990s a partially-iconoclastic impulse focused on exploring the mortality of media materials has often taken the form of medium-specific noise. However, in recent years alternative strategies that counteract clarity, involving iconoclastic disruptions of the process of mediation, supported by a host of degrading techniques and strategies that thicken and foreground the medium and its materiality, have partially replaced uses of medium-specific noise. Cultural analysts awake to these and related developments have responded with a series of productive interventions. Drawing on many of these, I propose a media aesthetic approach where the disruptions in question are conceived as involving instances of *precarious mediation* to be examined within a *precarious aesthetics*. The music videos of Lana Del Rey effectively articulate ways in which precarious mediation is used in contemporary popular culture. In many of her music videos, like *Summertime Sadness* (2012) and *Summer Wine* (2013), the precarious mediation is given a nostalgic inflection, where an ambiguous yearning for the past is imbricated with cunning attempts to perfect imperfection. This nostalgia appears iconoclastic on the level of mediation as well as in its yearning for the past greatness of America. Thus, Del Rey may not merely be taken to contribute to the exploration of precarious mediation with a nostalgic inflection but also to touch on, in conflicting ways, aspects of the precarity which provides an important part of the experience of the present moment.

Keywords: music video, Lana Del Rey, precarious aesthetics, nostalgia, imperfection, beauty, medium-specific noise, vintage

Lana Del Rey's April 2013 music video *Summer Wine*, released at a time when she was among the hottest names in popular music and had some of the most prestigious music video directors at her fingertips – among them Anthony Mandler, who made the music videos for *Ride* (2012) and *National Anthem* (2012) – presents an aggressively de-skilled, do-it-yourself Super 8 cinematography in which the impression of contingent laissez-faire is crowned by shots that are in fact upside down. Its faded colours and worn footage mired with flecks and missing frames inscribes itself into a wider contemporary interest in employing mediation that is unstable and liable to break down and fail, as if wanting to explore how not only 'you and I', but also our media, are 'born to die', to borrow a provocative line from the song *Born to Die* from Del Rey's successful eponymous 2012 album.

The obsolescence of analogue media along with a rapid succession of digital formats has sensitised us to the mortality of our media; it has also spawned what Dominik Schrey has called 'a golden age of nostalgia for these allegedly "dead media" that … continue to haunt a popular culture obsessed with its own past'.[1] This nostalgia for increasingly obsolete media has often been intertwined with an interest in the aesthetic and rhetorical powers of formats like the vinyl record, Super 8 film, VHS tapes, and a host of others as evoked by means of their medium-specific noise.[2] After a strong presence in (audio)visual culture since the mid-1990s, the use of worn film stock, mushy VHS tapes, and surface noise from vinyl records is itself wearing thin. Such usage is now aggressively complemented by a creative exploration of other medium materialities, partly spawned by an interest in counteracting the clarity that new digital recording technologies offer. Many of the music videos for Del Rey's songs – the one for *Summer Wine* which she directed herself, as she did with a number of videos early in her career, as well as professionally directed videos – contribute to these developments by expanding the palette of iconoclastic strategies from medium-specific noise in particular to include broader cinematographic techniques that render the mediation partly precarious, often in ways that effect sensations of nostalgia.

The variety and ubiquity of strategies in this broader field, where Del Rey's nostalgic practice is but one of many, make any conception of this multiplicity under a single term tenuous. Multiple terms have also proven useful in describing the phenomena in question. Laura Marks has dis-

cussed our love for 'a disappearing image' as well as 'haptic images' and 'analogue nostalgia';[3] André Habib has analysed 'the attraction of the ruin';[4] Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini have pointed to a surge in 'low-resolution' media;[5] and Hito Steyerl has written about 'poor images'.[6] As we have seen, Schrey has also discussed 'analogue nostalgia',[7] and I have discussed a sub-set of the practices in question as a matter of medium-specific noise.[8] While all of these terms may productively inform our explorations into these image materials, the flickering instability with which these degraded images are often inflicted, for example in the video for Del Rey's song *Summertime Sadness* (2012), calls attention to the *precarious* quality of the mediation they often instantiate. This quality has led me to describe these instances as involving *precarious mediation*, and to construe the body of thinking aimed at exploring such practices as a *precarious aesthetics*.

1 Precarious life – precarious aesthetics

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective 'precarious' as being 'vulnerable to the will or decision of others', as 'insecurely founded', and as dependent on 'chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable', also 'fraught with physical danger or insecurity; at risk of falling, collapse, or similar accident'. Thus, the term precarious does not merely designate the nouns it is used to qualify as uncertain and liable to fail. The instability and risk is fundamentally relational; it is grounded in a condition that is contingent on other people or entities.

The increased traction of the term in cultural analysis derives mainly from developments in the art world, a heightened sense of insecurity after the 9/11 attacks, and a growing insecurity in the labour market. The art critic and historian Hal Foster started a commentary in *Artforum* in December 2009 with the words

> [n]o concept comprehends the art of the past decade, but there is a condition that this art has shared, and it is a precarious one. Almost any litany of the machinations of the last ten years will evoke this state of uncertainty.[9]

He went on to localise the present sense of precariousness in the neoliberalism promoted by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher,

> targeting the most vulnerable … in ways that made their lives even more precarious. Over the past decade, this condition became all but pervasive, and it is this heightened insecurity that much art has attempted to manifest, even to exacerbate …. Paradoxically, then, precariousness seems almost constitutive of much art, yet sometimes in a manner that transforms this debilitating affliction into a compelling appeal.[10]

Foster, then, takes his inspiration both from artistic practice and from the ways in which neoconservative politics have contributed to a sense of insecurity and vulnerability to life lived. He draws inspiration from the philosopher Judith Butler, who employs the notion of *precarious life* to explain a fundamental sense of dependency and insecurity, to which the attacks on 9/11 have alerted us.[11]

Consonant with both Foster and Butler, drawing on an analysis of the affective and existential consequences of an increasingly neoliberal labour market, the cultural analyst Lauren Berlant proposes that 'a spreading precarity provides the dominant structure and experience of the present moment, cutting across class and localities'.[12] Berlant's words speak to the experiential prevalence and resonance of a precarity that 'has saturated the consciousness' of subjects across populations,[13] allowing even the wealthy to experience 'the material and sensual fragilities and unpredictability that have long been distributed to the poor and socially marginal'.[14] However, Berlant also notes that for some the increasing flexibility in the job market does not translate into unpredictable hours or even to no work at all, but into a greater freedom from a nine-to-five confinement. Furthermore, when considering how precariousness has saturated contemporary life worlds we should also take into account the current premium on risk as an intensifier of life, as a strategy for fulfilment, well exemplified through thrill-seeking entertainment activities and extreme sports that may involve considerable risk of physical harm to participants.[15] Such a hedonistic 'being-towards-death' doubles down on precarity by facing mortality in the interest of intensifying life. Precarity, like risk, we are reminded, is not equally distributed – some are largely subjected to it while others, to some extent, get to curate its presence in their lives.

In an effort to bridge the social, economic, and the aesthetic, much as Foster does, the art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud notes how 'endurance' in current consumer society, 'whether it concerns objects or relations, has become a rare thing'.[16] He draws on the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's characterisation of the present period as one of 'liquid modernity'.[17] Its ensuing life form, 'liquid life', according to Bauman, 'is a precarious life,

lived under conditions of constant uncertainty'.[18] Bauman outlines, according to Bourriaud, 'a society of generalized disposability, driven "by the horror of expiry", where nothing is more decried than "the steadfastness, stickiness, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike"'.[19] Bourriaud suggests that art has not only found 'the means to resist this new, unstable environment, but has also derived specific means from it'. He proposes that 'a precarious regime of aesthetics is developing'.[20] More precisely, Bourriaud identifies what he calls three main patterns in precarious aesthetics: *transcoding*, *flickering*, and *blurring*. He sees transcoding as based on forms that are

> displayed in the shape of copies, forever in a transitory state …. The visible appears here as a nomad by definition, a collection of iconographic ghosts.[21]

He describes flickering with reference to non-photographic materials that are variously manifesting themselves and then disappearing from sight; he exemplifies blurring by photographic materials that are out of focus or subject to other kinds of blur. Like Foster's notion articulated in 2009, Bourriaud's conception of 'the iconography of the precarious world' is suggestive but rather broad. Instead, to ensure a more limited and coherent field of investigation, I am proposing a media aesthetic perspective whereby we interrogate deliberate uses of precarious mediation.

2 From *Summertime Sadness* to *Summer Wine*

In the music video *Summertime Sadness* mortality operates in its story as well as in its mediation. A range of disruptive strategies is employed. The image shakes intensely in the opening; frames seem to be missing, creating a jagged and flickering mediation. The footage appears to be vintage in its faded and worn look, or perhaps it may better be characterised as used, at times even used up. The first shot of Del Rey introduces light leaks that cause the image to temporarily collapse into flickering grey-green-red monochrome hues sprinkled with flecks characteristic of a torn film-strip. Such disruptions haunt the music video throughout in an irregular rhythm that provides a more or less continuous precarious mediation.

Fig. 1: Momentary light leak, flare, and flecks in music video for Summertime Sadness *(2012).*

The decaying footage calls forth the frailty and vulnerability of human life, a frailty that is fatal to the two young women in the video, who in their summertime sadness throw themselves to their deaths. The deaths of the young women are conveyed in a medium haunted by its own looming death, evoking works like Peter Delpeut's *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) and Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2001), also a number of other films that use collages of decaying film stock to explore the ambiguous attractions of the ruin.[22]

Death in the video for *Summertime Sadness*, like in that for *Born to Die*, is also entangled with the intense bliss of young love, as the lyrics make clear:

> I'm feelin' electric tonight
> Cruising down the coast goin' 'bout 99
> Got my bad baby by my heavenly side
> I know if I go, I'll die happy tonight…
>
> Honey, I'm on fire, I feel it everywhere,
> Nothing scares me anymore…
>
> Kiss me hard before you go
> Summertime sadness.[23]

The precarity of life is celebrated, emphasised by means of a 'bad baby' behind the wheels driving dangerously fast. This intensifies the love and the feeling of 'being electric'. A death drive is interwoven with and even

motivated by the form the love takes, the sense that *I cannot live without you*. Dying together promises to eternalise the love, to provide the only absolute guarantee against the insupportable idea of having to separate. Death, in this light, takes on a special beauty, which is why Del Rey can sing:

> Got my bad baby by my heavenly side
> I know if I go, I'll die happy tonight…

A curious sense of beauty emanates from the potentially shortened duration of a life lovingly lived. In such a setting fragility, contingency, and transient imperfection testify to the intensity of life while being in love and to a frail beauty that can hardly last. All the same we should not be blind to how this morbid boost of bliss also potentially comes to question a commercial culture bent on idealising the intensified now. If Del Rey's music may often involve a meeting between love and death in a gorgeous cinematic soundscape, and if death has the upper hand in *Summertime Sadness*, love reigns in *Summer Wine*. Love propels the persona evoked by Del Rey out of the monumental, sad, and melancholic yearning for the past to a playful and innocent life lived, as if the past has become her present, unfolding in the now.

Fig. 2: De-skilled, do-it-yourself cinematography in the music video for Summer Wine *(2013).*

Yet it seems a captured memory, trapped in the mythologised 1960s, as if it were an accidental home video shot in 1967 when the song was recorded by Lee Hazlewood and Nancy Sinatra in the version we now consider a

classic. The video seems as if it were shot by Del Rey's character and her lover. The radically de-skilled do-it-yourself cinematography inscribes a bodily dynamic that seems increasingly animated, quite literally, by summer wine. It impresses upon us an embodied and lived 1967 moment in a curiously visceral form.

Vivian Sobchack meditates on representations of danger and possible death in documentaries and the ethics such representations are governed by:

> [s]igns of the filmmaker's situation and stance (quite literally, 'attitude') are, for example, inscribed in and visibly represented by the camera's stability or movement in relation to the situation that it perceives, in the framing of the object of its vision, in the distance that separates it from the event, in the persistence or reluctance of its gaze in the face of a horrific, chaotic, unjust, or personally dangerous event.[24]

Bill Nichols in his axiology of documentary ethics (largely inspired by Sobchack) states:

> [a]s an anthropomorphic extension of the human sensorium the camera reveals not only the world but its operator's preoccupations, subjectivity, and values.[25]

However, as an anthropomorphic extension of the human sensorium the camera may not merely reveal danger and death but also other aspects of the world in which its operators are engulfed. It can be treacherous and testify to a wide range of 'preoccupations, subjectivities, and values', – also to the bliss of a summer romance by the sea. So rather than invoking danger the disruptive mediation here invokes a spontaneous and flirtatious living-in-the-now enhanced by a romantic setting, the sea, a loving partner, a guitar, a Super 8 camera, and plenty of summer wine. It is as if the summer wine inscribes itself into the camera, as if the embodied camera has been drinking. Certainly we are invited to believe that the camera operators have had plenty, as indicated by the lyrics. In documentaries involving danger as well as in horror films we are often led to believe that the more precarious the mediation the more dangerous the situation. Here, however, it seems that the more precarious the mediation the more fun was had. In addition to this the low resolution warm colours and medial inadequacies help evoke an impression that this fun was had in the mid-1960s and captured by a Super 8 film of its time, appropriately

decayed so as to be mired with endearing imperfections, which makes the frail memories of this blissful day all the more cherished, all the more beautiful.

3 Lana Del Rey, beauty and imperfection

The way Del Rey presents herself in the videos mentioned appears to loosely negotiate two different iconographic traditions as well as two different takes on the beautiful. The difference is clearly articulated in the opening of the video for the song *Born to Die*. In a classically beautiful and monumental royal chapel, Del Rey sits as a queen on a throne, all alone, flanked by a tiger on each side. The camera, in a perfectly symmetrical composition, moves slowly towards her, offering a high-resolution view with supreme visibility. In the role of the Queen she remains still, except for some gestural expressions that help convey the lyrics.

Fig. 3: The Queen on the throne in the music video for Born to Die (*2012*).

These images are intercut with her alter ego: a dynamic young girl, presented in partly fragmented and opaque shots, running to unite with her lover. They are engulfed in an iconography saturated with Americana, well-worn tokens of nostalgia that have come to symbolise the past greatness of the United States: a late-1960s Ford Mustang Fastback, blue jeans, red Converse sneakers, the American flag, and so on.

Fig. 4: The Renegade Teen with her lover in the music video for Born to Die (*2012*).

The young girl is intensely consummating her love, until she dies in a car crash. In the end we see her lifeless body in her lover's arms, his Mustang in flames in the background.

With these two iconographies, two personas important to the early Del Rey are introduced.[26] We could call them the Queen and the Renegade Teen. While the Queen tends to appear as a beautiful, late-1950s diva in long gowns, often in a style reminiscent of singers like Julie London, the Renegade Teen is prone to wear late-1960s style rough jeans shorts, Converse sneakers, baggy T-shirts, and also a tan-fringed suede biker jacket. This double iconography is also reflected in her singing. The opening of *Born to Die* is illustrative. The voice of the Queen is dark, deep, serene, its limited dynamism contributing to a monumental and slightly melancholic style lacking in affection. This low-pitched tone is broken up and contrasted with the husky and flirtatious, girlish petulance of the Renegade Teen. Thus, the classic beauty of the Queen is contrasted with the fragile and humble charm of the sweet-voiced teen who understands how to be alluring in a sexual way. The girlish voice is mired with imperfections and shows considerable affinities with Marilyn Monroe's singing voice. Phil Moore, who coached Monroe, noted that:

> [s]he always sounds as if she's just waking up. You'd be surprised what kind of effect that has on male listeners.[27]

The musicologist Richard Middleton likewise relates 'the girlish but provocatively knowing sound of Madonna's voice' to Monroe.[28] Del Rey's Renegade Teen positions herself on the more innocent side of Monroe rather than the knowing one opted for by Madonna. The reference to Monroe is

not only pertinent because of its flirtatious innocence but also because of the unskilled helplessness Monroe's imperfection projected.

Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* writes about 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent … [as] one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable'.[29] Thus, there is something classical about the contrast Del Rey epitomises, the monumental, deep, and serene beauty against the contingent dynamism of the breathy girlish voice. A related contrast can be found in the concept of the beautiful itself. When used to describe a person, particularly a woman, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the face as 'possessing attractive harmony of features, figure, or complexion; exceptionally graceful, elegant, or charming in appearance'.[30] A minor tension may be observed between 'an ideal of physical perfection … harmony of form or colour … graceful, elegant' on the one side and an 'attractive harmony of features … charming in appearance' on the other. Whereas the former articulates a perfect harmony of forms and features the latter focuses more on the effects produced, on what is attractive and charming.

An account of the beautiful which precisely opts for the latter aspects is offered by the philosopher Edmund Burke in his classic 1757 treatise on aesthetics *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke dismisses perfect harmony of forms and features and instead focuses on what is attractive and charming, or, rather, what is endearing and, in his own words, causes love. He defines beauty as 'that quality, or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it'.[31] According to Burke, who wrote this text before the age of nineteen, beauty finds its highest form in the female, which motivates him to study it there.[32] As will become clear, Burke's conceptions both of beauty and women appear limited and skewed, but his observations resonate with some of the skills Monroe honed to command male desires – desires that are also courted by Del Rey. Burke develops an interest in how imperfection is intertwined with and may even cause beauty. It is clear to him that contrary to received opinion perfection is not the cause of beauty. On the contrary, he proposes that beauty

> almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness … Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty … modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality, and certainly heightens every other that is so.[33]

Burke expands on this in the following way:

> [a]n air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of *delicacy*, and even of fragility, is almost essential to it … It is the flowery species, so remarkable for its weakness and momentary duration, that gives us the liveliest idea of beauty and elegance … The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it.[34]

Tenuous as his observation might be in its generalised association of women, beauty, and imperfection, it nonetheless resonates surprisingly well with the lure of imperfection in Del Rey's Monroe-inspired voice work, even more so on an entirely different level: the fragile, beautiful, and distressed media materialities in the music videos for her songs.

Thus, the catalogue of traits that Burke offers appear relevant for describing the Renegade side of Del Rey's voice as well as the precarious media materialities. They both may signal naïve innocence, weakness and imperfection, delicacy, and even fragility and timidity. These elements are consistent with a sweetness often evoked in the way of singing, a gestural energy impressing upon us an amiable, kind, gracious, and benign character, often inhabiting a largely innocent and longed-for past. However, Del Rey also attempts to spike her nostalgia with a bite, alluded to in her descriptions of herself as being a 'gangster Nancy Sinatra'[35] and a 'Lolita [who] got lost in the Hood'.[36]

Burke's observations of women's attempts to counterfeit weakness, to lisp and to totter in their walk, curiously, apply to some of Del Rey's girlish and flirtatious phrasings. They appear even more resonant with the precarious mediation in videos like *Summertime Sadness* and *Summer Wine*, where weakness is counterfeited – that is, deliberately produced – and where the medium itself appears to lisp and to totter in its precarious mediation.

Another element in Burke's account of the beautiful concerns its lack of longevity – a point that speaks to the curious attractions of obsolete media even more than to the young women Burke addressed when he commented on how 'weakness and momentary duration … gives us the liveliest idea of beauty and elegance'. The beauty of the fragile and weak, of momentary duration, is not lost on Del Rey. She makes weakness and momentary duration implicitly echo notions such as *Carpe Diem* (pluck the day [as it is ripe]), *Memento Mori* (remember [that you have] to die), and even *Death and the Maiden*, which not only entices the young girl to love

before her beauty fades but also construes Death himself as her lover. The momentary duration is called forth by Del Rey's blissful being-towards-death and also brought to bear on the level of the medium itself through its distressed materiality, recalling for us that not only young girls and humans more generally, but also our media – which André Bazin poignantly saw as being devised to defend us against the passage of time – are subject to what he called 'the victory of time', that is, to death.[37]

4 Perfection, imperfection, and iconoclastic nostalgia

Obviously, imperfection, whether in terms of the precarious mediation of the visuals or in terms of aspects of the phrasing of the vocals, hold considerable traction now as well as beyond its present surge in popularity. In 1928, Theodor W. Adorno made an early case for imperfection in recording. He wrote:

> [t]alking machines and phonograph records seem to have suffered the same historical fate as that which once befell photographs: the transition from artisanal to industrial production transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed. As the recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume, the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound declines as if the singer were being distanced more and more from the apparatus.[38]

A vibrancy of life emanates where imperfections are tolerated. A similar point has been made about jazz. Miles Davis 'has long been infamous for missing more notes than any other major trumpet player', according to the musicologist Robert Walzer, but he was not bothered by his so-called mistakes.[39] In fact, they may have helped him to convey life lived in the moment, a sense that *Now's the Time*, in the words of Charlie Parker's 1945 composition. It may also have evoked a sense of being cool, of not trying too hard, not caring too much – an attitude Del Rey often epitomises. However, the vibrancy set in motion by Davis and Del Rey kindles an expressive theatricality more than the authenticity called for by Adorno. Authenticity, to the extent the notion is relevant here, must be sought in the cracks between poses or in the multidimensional mosaics of life these poses accumulate.

Del Rey's vocal imperfections ensure a fallible yet lively quality in her performance, where human warmth, lack of pretence, and amateurish

reality effects help strip the performer bare and produce a sense of intimacy, a feeble and frail yarning for love and a sense of lost innocence. Her voice often negotiates shifts between the imperfection of girlish innocence and flirtatious playfulness against the colder monumentality and melancholic gravity that defines the well-composed and world-weary voice of her Queen persona.

The forms of imperfection employed by Del Rey and Miles Davis tend to be highly perfected. To clearly understand how this can be it may be productive to take a closer look at the term perfection itself. The first definition of the term may be found in the work of Aristotle.[40] He offers three criteria: what is perfect is complete, it is the best of its kind, and it has attained its end.

In a time when, to a considerable degree, perfection has lost traction within aesthetics, but where in various ways imperfection is still is sought perfected, this three-part definition might actually provide a way to get beyond the otherwise suggestive paradox of a perfect imperfection. The kind of perfection that has lost traction might first of all be that form of perfection which is based on completeness. The interest in making the best of its kind as well as in aiming for an artistic creation to attain its purpose remains considerable. The resilience of these latter two criteria may rest on their fundamental relativity. The best of its kind is relative to the kind aimed at, just as a purpose attained may vary quite freely with the purpose in question.

The purpose aimed at in artistic creation now may often be less to build harmony and beauty in a work perfectly in balance – to seek completeness in composition, where nothing can be added nor subtracted – than to entice and engage the imagination which, to some extent, precisely thrives on the incompleteness of the unfinished or ruinous to inspire creative play.[41] When a work is groomed to make it enticing for the imagination, imperfection in the sense of incompleteness may be perfected. At the same time, of course, the work may be perfected by trying to make it the best of its kind.

While the Queen persona, in accordance with the classical beauty of her royal chapel, may instantiate perfection in the sense of completeness, the Renegade Teen may sacrifice such a completeness in favour of attaining a frail and charming intimacy. Both may still aspire to attain their purpose and be the best of their kind. As I have suggested, this may lead them to invoke different pasts by divergent means. If the Queen recalls a past of classic beauty, with long gowns and details perfectly groomed which we may well associate with a style of the 1950s which the 1960s ended up

overthrowing, the Renegade Teen takes us back to the potent energies of the even more nostalgically coveted 1960s by means of Americana and decaying media, and a voice evoking the innocence of yesteryear, in a seductive amalgamation of beauty and imperfection.

Del Rey is not modest when it comes to rubbing up against American icons from the 1950s and 1960s. In the video for *National Anthem* (2013), she impersonates Monroe singing *Happy Birthday, Mr. President* to John F. Kennedy – only to moments later take on the role of the president's wife, Jacquelyn Kennedy. In *Tropico* (2013) she meets Monroe, Elvis, and John Wayne in the Garden of Eden while sporting the following connections: 'Elvis is my father, Marilyn is my mother, and Jesus is my bestest friend'.[42] This rendezvous among iconic signs may recall Umberto Eco's observation that

> [t]wo clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking *among themselves*, and celebrating a reunion. Just as [at] the height of pain, [one] may encounter sensual pleasure, and the height of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too, the height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime.[43]

If a cliché refers to something that 'has become overused to the point of losing its original meaning or effect, even to the point of being trite or irritating',[44] this is indeed the case with the Monroe, Elvis, and John Wayne offered by *Tropico*. They appear overused, even, as much of Del Rey's media materialities, nearly used up. They epitomise imperfection more than star quality, as if they were enlisted from an impersonator contest at the local dive bar. Whether the height of banality here allows a glimpse of the sublime is uncertain but it clearly afflicts icons of a coveted past with an iconoclastic gesture, indicating a certain hollowness of the stuff on which dreams are made. *Tropico*, it appears, allegorises a fall from the perfection of Eden to the finite imperfections of the fallible human world – a fall that is a familiar trope in a world in which we are *Born to Die*.

Nostalgia tends to be inspired by some level of discontent with the present. If Berlant is right in her observation that 'a spreading precarity provides the dominant structure and experience of the present moment', the current predicament should offer rich sources to inspire nostalgic sentiments. Add to this an accelerated speed of modernisation which may stimulate what Andreas Huyssen calls a 'desire to preserve, to lend a historical aura to objects otherwise condemned to be thrown away, to be-

come obsolete'.[45] Such an accelerated speed of modernisation may not only grow appreciation for vintage dresses and obsolete media, it may also infuse us 'with imputations of past beauty', in the words of the sociologist Fred Davis.[46]

It is easy to find such nostalgic yearnings in Del Rey's videos, like *Summer Wine*. But it is not equally easy to find the regressive tendency that the cultural analysts Michael Pickering and Emily Keightly associate with nostalgia in its simple form, a retrotyping which involves 'a purposive selectiveness of recall that celebrates certain aspects of a past period and discards others that would compromise the celebratory process'.[47] To the extent that Del Rey presents idealised images of a benign and widely embraceable past that no longer exists or has never existed, they tend to be fraught with iconoclastic energies that subtly question them or ironically contradict their validity. Icons of Hollywood greatness may be yearned for and cherished but they are also compromised and rendered hollow – much like media of the past are yearned for but, at the same time, are displayed in a partly ruinous state mired with medium-specific noise. This means that the 'celebratory process' by which the retrograding operates, in subtle ways or by means of explicit irony, as in the opening of *Tropico*, tends to be compromised. In fact, Del Rey appears to take joy in compromising the celebratory process by means of various forms of iconoclasm, making her nostalgia fundamentally iconoclastic. This opens up to a potential concern with the current predicament addressed by Berlant and an implicit political questioning.

The art historian Karen van den Berg displays sensitivity to this when she notes that Del Rey's 'videos are not simply a mixture of vintage images with a range of references' but may be taken to articulate a yearning 'for a life beyond the flexible late capitalism, in which every emotion has become a subject of the service economy'.[48] However, van den Berg is less convincing when she proposes that Del Rey, along with other artists, may engage in a reconstruction of 'the written-off idea of authenticity … [which] can be found in the milieus of the underprivileged, where people are presumed to be uncorrupted by career ambitions'.[49] The iconoclastic touch by which both stars and representatives from the underprivileged are typified and ironically undermined leaves limited hopes for reconstructing what van den Berg refers to as 'the true America' in the existence of either.

It is easier to acknowledge Ayesha A. Siddiqi's observation that

> [f]or those who came of age during the war on terror, for whom adolescence was announced by 9/11 and for whom failed wars, a massive recession, and a total surveillance apparatus were the paranoid gifts of our adulthood, Lana Del Rey gives us a patriotism we can act out.[50]

Siddiqi's description of the background here is curiously reminiscent of Fosters' summarising of a precarious condition defining 'the art of the decade'. At a time when postmodern irony is pronounced long dead, but still in some forms looms more or less explicitly inside a number of cultural practices, love for US icons as well as for the US itself, for many, has become inseparable from an understanding of its shortcomings. As Siddiqi points out:

> [f]or those who spent their teen years typing in scare quotes, Lana lets us negotiate American identity with less cognitive dissonance by serving patriotic cliché as kitsch. … Affectless without irony, full of pop-symbolism that refuses to signify, perhaps an American culture drained of all moral qualities or ethical commitments is worth holding onto. A finally palatable Americana: full of no more sentiment than an Instagram grid.[51]

This conception, which resonates well with Luke Turner's observation that we 'can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment',[52] allows us to see Del Rey not merely as displaying an interest in precarious mediation but potentially also in aspects of a contemporary precarity that has become a source of nostalgic yearning at present. Moreover, she does not merely display an iconoclastic nostalgia with regard to increasingly obsolete media forms, she also invites a questioning of the flaws and inadequacies in the retrotyping upon which much nostalgia tends to be based and in which Americana traditionally has been mired, while also, paradoxically, indulging in the yearnings for yesteryear. Thus, her use of precarious mediation is intimately connected to nostalgia and her use of imperfection is similarly linked to the iconoclast form this nostalgia takes, as well as to a deep seated existential ambivalence toward an iconic past which is not anymore what it was. These observations tell us something about the operational logic of precarious mediation associated with Del Rey, but, of course, precarious mediation may also take quite different forms.

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ARTFORUM

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THE YEAR IN POP

LANA DEL REY

Still from Lana Del Rey's 2012 video *National Anthem*, directed by Anthony Mandler.

IN A MIDDLING YEAR FOR POP MUSIC, the cleverest piece of cultural criticism nevertheless came in the form of a new hit from Lana Del Rey, aka Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, heiress to

an Internet domain-name fortune and proprietor of one of the most promising voices of the Obama era. The track "National Anthem" (*Born to Die*, Interscope), Del Rey's parapatriotic send-up of American luxury, may not rank as the year's greatest song, but its eight-minute video, which reimagines the Camelot fairy tale of JFK and Jackie O, invents a new subset of pop: Call it postironic satire—a Swiftian revival that multiplies the objects of its parody with such reckless guile that it seems challenging and new. The satiric vision the video proposes is syncretic: Del Rey stands in for Jackie but also for Marilyn Monroe—and for herself, a contemporary celebrity princess; her costar in the video, fellow New Yorker A$AP Rocky, represents Kennedy but also Barack Obama and gangster rap, incarnating both the right-wing stereotype of black power and the liberal voter's fantasy of Obama-as-messianic-prince—a limousine liberal worthy of his vehicle.

As the video begins its long intro, Del Rey steps up to a lectern and croons Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" to a darkened audience. The clip is black-and-white and, like much of the video, uses digitally "aged" HD to evoke either vintage 8-mm home movies or, if you prefer, the filters of Instagram. Through the silhouettes, we see a bling-fingered, cigar-smoking Rocky imbibing Del Rey's performance with single-minded lust. The video cuts to color: In a car with a tan leather interior, a dark-skinned hand emerging from a suit jacket grasps the exposed thigh of a white woman in a short skirt; screams ensue, along with faux footage of assassination day in Dallas; then a three-second interlude of Del Rey in a patch of azaleas; then a shot of her hand grazing Rocky's leg; finally, the camera pulls back, revealing the couple enjoying a picnic with children on the lawn of their mansion (a lyric indicates the Hamptons, though it might as well be Hyannis).

[video]
Lana Del Rey's *National Anthem*, 2012

As the intro fades and the song begins in earnest, we watch Del Rey fondle lion skins, butter toast, grind with her dice-throwing, sweater-setted prez, and stroll along the beach with their exquisite offspring—stand-ins for Sasha and Malia—while issuing blunt and brutish glorifications of American culture: "Money is the anthem of success," the chorus goes. Footage corroborates the claim, showcasing all that is wonderful, odious, and precarious in the image bank of American history. Del Rey's heavy-handed visuals revel in sex, money, miscegenation, fame, death—the pat psychodramas that propel the narratives of both reality

TV and centuries of actual Beltway scandal. But Del Rey comes to praise her country, not to bury it. If her obsession with lost American innocence feels more automated than searching, that doesn't necessarily dilute its power. In place of critique, Del Rey uses historical mash-up to deliver a concentrated extract of contemporaneity, more eloquently pegging our cultural moment than any verse about smartphones.

According to Rocky, the video is "some swag shit . . . some 2015 shit," suggesting its vision might be *so* contemporary that it could take a while to properly digest. If 2012 was the year that hip-hop finally embraced gay pride, it's worth noting, perhaps, that Rocky, as straight male, doesn't speak in Del Rey's video: His erotic, mischievously coded body is featured prominently on-screen, but he isn't "featured" on the track—he has surrendered his sexual self-presentation entirely to Del Rey. In a typical pop/hip-hop collaboration, Rocky would be allotted thirty seconds to voice his own desire and thereby reclaim the phallus. But the video for "National Anthem" isn't a collaboration—it's matriarchal reverie. A reversal allows Del Rey to style herself as a rapper, "winin and dinin / drinkin and drivin / excessive buyin / overdose and dyin," projecting a persona that's seamless and impenetrable even as her physical body stands ready to exercise its prerogatives. Del Rey is not the product of handlers: The concept for the video is her own; she penned the treatment and picked the director. In silencing Rocky, Del Rey not only puts pop on top but also isolates female desire as the essence of Americanness.

Men hardly ever speak in Del Rey's videos. Their silence also permeates *Ride*. This more recent video follows the life of a streetwalking saloon singer in Big Sky Country who spends her days and nights among the motorcycle-gang members she picks up and services on the road. Although its milieu is white and poor instead of royal and interracial, *Ride* doubles down on the gendered incitements of *Anthem*. In both videos, men are treated with gentle, erotic fascination. Yet unlike the love interest in *Anthem*, the Hells Angel types in "Ride" are not patent hunks—they're obese and greasy. Del Rey's enjoyment of, for example, getting fucked by one of the fattest of these men over a pinball machine shocks the viewer more than her cavorting with a black JFK. Where *Anthem* deals gingerly with race and class stereotypes, the newer video exploits them with immodest vigor, depicting rural poverty with either offensive condescension or a proud fondness bordering on nativism. "There's no use in talking to people who have a home," explains Del Rey's voice-over. "They have no idea what it's like

to seek safety in other people, for home to be wherever you lay your head." We wonder whether Del Rey herself has any idea about such things (though, in fact, she did spend a year living in a trailer park, and in varying states of "homelessness," during her wayward adolescence). "I believe in the country America used to be," her character proclaims. "I believe in the person I want to become." In *Ride*, Del Rey, a libidinal feminist and slumming heiress, makes clear that she can do whatever—and whomever—she wants.

[video]
Lana Del Rey's 2012 video *Ride*, directed by Anthony Mandler.

If satire traditionally lampoons society by ridiculing the things we revere, Del Rey reveres the things we ridicule, exalting our baser instincts and especially our exhibitionism. This isn't to say her videos lack a reformist edge: In their shamelessness, they attack shame; in their glee, they sanctify desire, which is the ultimate subject of Del Rey's work. For Del Rey, desire and persona are inextricable; she has turned herself into a figure for desire, and a game-changing one at that: In demeanor, clothing, makeup, and even voice, she cultivates the aesthetic of an older woman. Although barely eighteen months senior to Rihanna or Grimes, Del Rey performs as a MILF, shunning the signifiers of youth and suggesting, through extravagant self-invention, the extent to which adulthood is wasted on adults. Where Lady Gaga, Del Rey's exact contemporary, takes her cues from big-budget musicals like *Cats*—outdoing her competitors by reinventing her look as many times in a single concert as Madonna has during her entire career—Del Rey has chosen embellishments that could be said to bring her closer to who she "really" is. I have no reason to doubt that Del Rey was born with those lips, but if it's the case that they got extra help along the way, I'm thankful someone had the presence of mind to correct nature's mistake.

For performers like Gaga, passion for artifice and modification all too easily lends itself to physical escapism—to palpable hatred of the body. What distinguishes Del Rey from her pop peers is that she's comfortable in her various skins and commits to the characters she creates. Other stars put on costumes; Del Rey puts on personalities, much as might a Trecartin tween. In this way, more than any of her rivals, male or female, Del Rey queers pop. Her unwinking enjoyment of her own perversity would be enough to qualify her as a great queer performance artist; her astonishing television debut on *Saturday Night Live* last winter, in which she covered her own hits as though she were a drag-queen impersonator, put her over the top.

In a pop era dominated by gadget-obsessed austerity cults, Del Rey has taken less than a year to construct an alternative path. After launching her career on the strength of a YouTube video made with material swiped from the Web—the sources for *Video Games* somewhat irritatingly range from skateboarder uploads to home videos of kids swimming to paparazzi footage of a drunk Paz de la Huerta—Del Rey has gone on to exploit the medium to showcase a body of work that, refreshingly, makes you forget about the Internet. Her unfashionable insistence on iconography over technological smoke and mirrors gives her videos a substantive, meaty core. Much as her father amassed a fortune collecting domain names linked to physical places (e.g., www.philadelphiarealestate.com), Del Rey reminds us through her work that the Internet is merely a platform for delivering the things that truly matter—sex, violence, and property in the Hamptons.

Del Rey is not a political singer, whatever that could mean in 2012, but her songs and videos trade on, or perhaps consume, the great issues of our day. Del Rey is a fantasist, too, but her fantasies are worldly and ambitious. Her vision, while affirmative, is also unblinkered; through it, she brings a rare candor to an escapist enterprise. She allows us to escape, but to escape *into* reality, and thereby perhaps to remake it.

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James Franco Pays Poetic Tribute To His Muse And Friend, Lana Del Rey, "The Miami Idol Queen, Gone To London And Back For A Triumphant Hendrix Return"

James Franco Pays Poetic Tribute To His Muse And Friend, Lana Del Rey, "The Miami Idol Queen, Gone To London And Back For A Triumphant Hendrix Return"

January 19, 2015

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHUCK GRANT

There was a story on the Huffington Post about a Twitter backlash against a new singer who ostensibly bombed on Saturday Night Live. I watched the clip, it wasn't great. She wasn't transitioning between the high and low registers of "Video Games" very smoothly, and she didn't know what to do with her free hand; it awkwardly fluttered between her face and her side and she periodically touched her hair or made a deuce sign while singing, "They say the world was meant for two."

Juliette Lewis tweeted, “Wow watching this ‘singer’ on SNL is like watching a 12-yearold [sic] in their bedroom when theyre pretending to sing and perform #signofourtimes”

The following week, SNL cast member Kristen Wiig did a spot-on impersonation of Lana on “Weekend Update” as a response—she caught the body carriage, the voice, and even the lip curl:

“I thought [I sang two songs] but based on the public’s response to [my performance], I must have clubbed a baby seal while singing the Taliban national anthem.

“I think people thought I was stiff, distant, and weird, but there’s a perfectly good explanation for that: I am stiff, distant, and weird. It’s my thing.”

It is Lana’s thing. She’s weird. But she never wanted to be a live performer anyway. If she could have, she would have made her music, and her videos, in her room forever.

This is a poem about Lana Del Rey.

This is an essay about Lana Del Rey.

Lana has become my friend. She is a musician who is a poet and a video artist.

She grew up on the East Coast but she is an artist of the West Coast.

When I watch her stuff, when I listen to her stuff, I am reminded of everything I love about Los Angeles. I am sucked into a long gallery of Los Angeles cult figurines, and cult people, up all night like vampires and bikers.

The only difference between Lana and me is her haunting voice. That carries everything. The voice is the central axle around which the spokes of everything else extend.

My axle, like her voice is for her, is my acting. Out of it, I do everything else.

I don’t like vampires and bikers in my life, but I like them in my art.

Lana lives in her art, and when she comes down to earth for interviews, it gets messy, because she isn’t made for this earth. She is made to live in the world she creates. She is one who has been so disappointed by life, she had to create her own world. Just let her live in it.

I am a performer and she is a performer.

The thing about singers, especially the ones who write their own lyrics, is that everyone reads the person into the songs. An actor is sometimes aligned with his roles, but a singer is asked about her lyrics as if they were direct statements of her true thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes Lana doesn’t know what to say in interviews, so she plays into the idea that her songs are her, and not her creations.

Lana spends a lot of time alone because everyone wants in.

She has this idea for a film. I want to do it because it's a little like Sunset Boulevard. A woman is alone in a big house in L.A. She doesn't want to go out. She starts to go crazy, and becomes paranoid because she feels like people are watching her. Even in her own house. It's like an awesome B-movie that lives in Lana's head. It's about her, and it's not about her. Just like her music.

I wanted to interview Lana for a book and she said, "Just write around me, it's better if it's not my own words. It's almost better if you don't get me exactly, but try."

FROM SITES WE LOVE

REVIEW MUSIC

Lana Del Rey Lives In America's Messy Subconscious

September 4, 2019 · 2:45 PM ET

ANN POWERS

On her new album, Lana Del Rey (shown here in 2018) is at her most instantly compelling, fully committed to the messy alignments upon which her art is built.

Darren Gerrish/BFC/Getty Images

The trash on the Venice boardwalk sparkles like Wet n Wild lip gloss. This is what people forget about Los Angeles beaches: They're part of the city, inundated with the city's grit. Half-melted Icees in Styrofoam cups, one flip-flop, taco foil, condoms, a dead vape pen. Needles. But also: a Swarovski crystal earring. A pinwheel unmoored from its handle. A streak of gooey glitter. Coins of many lands. A few miles up the Pacific Coast Highway, away from the skateboarders and homeless people, WASPs sun themselves at country clubs as employees sweep the sands. But their brooms can't

clear the ocean.

"I'm mostly at the beach!" Lana Del Rey exclaimed in a recent interview, explaining her cultivated disconnect from the Hollywood pop machine. Reading this, I wonder where she goes and what she does after she unfolds her towel and sets up her umbrella. Does she drive past Malibu to El Matador, where the water is the cleanest but the one Porta-Potty often overflows? Down to Cabrillo Beach in San Pedro, near the aquarium where schoolkids swarm? In her songs she dwells on Venice and Long Beach, two places where the red signs the city uses to warn of excess sewage in the water show up the most. I think she goes to the beach but she spends her time looking at that filthy, shiny sand.

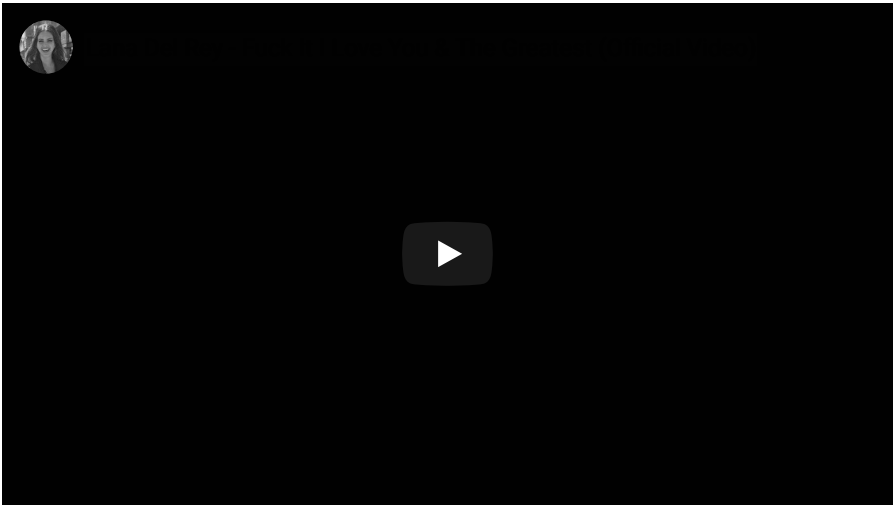
Lana Del Rey is up to her elbows in water in the video for "F*** It I Love You," one of the singles that built excitement for *Norman F****** Rockwell!* (referred to hereafter as *NFR!*), her fifth album and the one that has cemented her status as a serious artist among critics who may or may not have thought her previous work problematic, or at very least, incomplete. In several shots, she holds onto a surfboard. Her hair is in in Dutch braids, similar to the styles *cholas* wore in the 1990s. See, there's the slippage, the step away from an authentic or even consistent narrative: Few Latinas from East L.A. would have made it the 15 miles west to the beach 20 years ago, or even at the height of the surfing craze in the 1960s, when as a kid the writer Jack Lopez almost got beaten up by a tough guy for walking down Western Avenue in board shorts, clutching a copy of *Surfer* magazine. "*Cholo* meets surfer," he wrote in his memoir. "Not a good

thing." But Lopez was insistent in violating the boundaries of the acceptable; that wrongness, he wrote years later, endangered him but also helped him get free.

Music videos juxtapose disconnected images to induce a kind of dream state in the viewer: to approximate the effect of music itself. There's a subtle tension within many popular songs, however, between the unsettling effect of juxtaposing disparate elements — say, English folk melodies and Delta blues (that's Led Zeppelin) or Caribbean inflections and Nordic electronic beats (many Rihanna singles) — and the comfort of a unified narrative, the songwriter's art. The rise of the singer-songwriter in the 1960s reinforced the value of narrative pull and shored up other hierarchies: rock over disco, sitting and listening over dancing, lyrics over sound. (Exhibit A: The Poetry of Rock.) Hip-hop, a revolution in fragments, challenged this order, yet it still exerts itself in most discussions of what makes great songs.

For most of her career, Lana Del Rey has not participated in this discourse. Instead, she has made slippage the basis of her approach. It took her time to master this practice, and she's gone to extremes: Over the course of five albums, she's often repeated herself, mixed signals and followed her impulses over the edge of good taste. Critics have doubted her motives. But she has earned a following among listeners who value unmonitored reveries.

On *NFR!* Del Rey is at her most instantly compelling, a pro asserting her future spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, as her closest peer and rival Stefani Germanotta did with her turn in *A Star is Born*. Words like "classic" and "greatest" adhere to her now; she writes songs that use them unironically. The possibly fictional shade whose fluttery alto flickered and beckoned on YouTube nearly a decade ago is a woman now — "a modern day woman with a weak constitution," she intones on the album's billowing final track, "hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have — but I have it." That's one of several moments in which Del Rey seems to open herself up; another is the melancholy "Mariners Apartment Complex," four and a half minutes of gospel-inflected transcendence in which her pastiche is so perfectly constructed that it becomes flesh, an utterly believable plea by a weary but steadfast soul to the lover whose tether she refuses to loose. It's a story about which most people can feel something.



YouTube

Yet the sensitivity and compassion Del Rey expresses in these songs really resonates not in its straightforwardness, but because of all the pings it sets off in the listener's brain, each one hitting like a nearly-erased memory. In "Mariners," she deflects the Elton John comparison its piano part demands ("I ain't your candle in the wind"), only to build to a chorus that seemingly echoes the Oscar-winning theme from a classic 1970s disaster movie (Maureen McGovern's magisterial "The Morning After") and, in its warm but uncanny multi-tracked vocal hook, the synth-kissed love songs that brought Leonard Cohen back from obscurity in the 1980s. At least that's what one fan, namely me, hears. That's the gist of Lana Del Rey, and still her superpower as she floats toward more readable songcraft: Whether her music makes cultural connections that are obvious or obscure, they always feel deeply personal, individuated, like mementos.

In her early days, what she claimed — bouffanted femme-fatalism weirdly aligned with a tattered Fourth-of-July style patriotic nostalgia, Bettie Page reborn as an Instagram star — felt undeveloped and, because of that, cynical. Intimations that she'd had help in inventing herself clouded her status. But as she built her repertoire, Del Rey proved fully committed to the messy alignments of her art, and better able to articulate how they formed the stories by which she, or the characters she claimed as her own, lived.

She would be a problem — a loyalist to outdated ideals like mad love and bad-boy machismo, a constant gardener of the weediest patches of the contemporary psyche. On *NFR!* she remains that artist, even as she asks herself if she might, with insight, better compartmentalize her impulses.

Lana Del Rey is all about wrong combinations: sunset dreams and dirty water, Mexican-American braids and a wetsuit, hip-hop flow and torch song feeling, conventional feminine submissiveness and post-feminist self-possession. Cognitive dissonance is the essence of her art, the way she builds her dream logic. Satin slips, Freudian slips: Throughout her tenure as a pop star, Lana has pursued revelations about how desire disassembles and recombines elements of a woman's personality. "Heaven is a place on earth with you," she whispered in her first hit, 2011's "Video Games." She sang it just the way you do a line from a song that pops into your head unbidden, wondering if you're quoting your favorite current pop star or the one your mom loved in the '80s or something some guy said back in the '60s to a girl trying to be his perfect date. The sentiment is soaked in banality, but also in the perfume of all those other girls. "Tell me all the things you want to do," Lana continues. "I hear that you like the bad girls, honey, is that true?" And so a dream of romantic fulfillment slipped into self-negation, the way it has since time immemorial in the scripts that young women learn from those songs and from movies, their moms, other girls and the boys who benefit. The tone of her voice as she uttered these words was forever after labeled "sad," but was really something different. My mom would have called it "needy"; today, more common descriptions are "disempowered," "self-sabotaging," "unwoke." "Women hated me," Del Rey told writer Alex Frank in 2017. "I know why. It's because there were things I was saying that either they just couldn't connect to or were maybe worried that, if they were in the same situation, it would put them in a vulnerable place."

But we know this. Over the course of her five albums, as she has learned to be a more specific writer and a more adventurous vocalist and to make room in her echo-saturated arrangements for her words to resonate, Del Rey has continued to stand firmly against the ideal of self-empowerment. Instead, she has explored what happens when women call themselves children; when they stumble in high heels; when they put the love of a man before all. Mostly, critics have perceived this as an anti-feminist

stance. Lindsay Zoladz sympathetically recontextualized it in a cogent 2017 essay, seeing Del Rey's embodiment of the weak woman as an antidote to "empowerment as the default aspiration of the pop star" – the tendency of chart toppers from Beyoncé to Taylor Swift to configure their careers as one long therapeutic, vaguely political pep talk. Del Rey herself simply said she found feminism uninteresting. She's modified that stance somewhat in the aftermath of the #metoo movement, citing Trump's infamous "grab 'em" remark as a sign that sexuality has been weaponized beyond even her tolerance levels. Yet even on *NFR!*, an album some writers have extolled as a (circuitous) form of protest, Del Rey remains much more invested in describing how people — mostly women — fall apart, how they take risks or otherwise work against their own best interests in the pursuit of pleasure, intimacy and what she still guilelessly calls "love."

To many of its champions, *NFR!* is Del Rey's revenge against those who would misinterpret her, a fully realized conventional singer-songwriter album offering a critique of 21st-century decadence rather than another chance to wallow in it, an "obituary for America" that still extends some hope that, with the proper perspective, its best qualities – its beauty, its small-d democratic impulses – can be redeemed. The album certainly boasts Del Rey's most artfully constructed narratives, extending the arc of apparent self-realization also evident in widely framed narratives that stood out on her previous album, *Lust For Life*. In songs like "Coachella – Woodstock In My Mind," in which she made a cosmic quilt of her experience watching her artistic soulmate Father John Misty perform for fourth-generation flower children at a festival built on the countercultural helium fumes of electronic dance music, Del Rey made a sonic and emotional argument for collapsing the boundaries that uphold authenticity as a cultural value. Referencing a Led Zeppelin lyric in an easy-listening arrangement, she shared her view of utopia: a place in which parents and children and their children's children dissolve into each other under the sway of art. Music's power to unite is an old fashioned idea, romantic, even mystical — and conservative, in that it argues for art as a conduit for personal transformation rather than an identity marker that fuels political or cultural debate. At first considered a nihilist, Lana Del Rey became a champion of the meaningful, even as she maintained her stance that meaning is best communicated through strange juxtapositions.

With *NFR!*, Del Rey further invests in meaningfulness. She seems to have become more interesting in standing alongside (or towering over) her peers; in league with producer and co-writer Jack Antonoff, she makes space for comparisons to Lorde and the aforementioned Gaga and even Taylor Swift. The album's dominant story line describes an affair with a fellow artist in which the power roles never solidify, a situation Del Rey depicts as unsustainable but clarifying. Addressing this bohemian deadbeat, she upends the gender roles she's so often fetishized, trading in her kitten heels for kicks that allow her to keep walking. She cusses at her "man child," demanding that he grow up; she describes herself as the more active breadwinner ("you write, I tour, we make it work"). At one point, in a sonic nod to Leonard Cohen, she simply announces, "I'm your man."

These are the most cleanly satisfying moments of the album, evoking what we expect from singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell or Tori Amos, both of whom are clear inspirations in Del Rey's pursuit of legible expressiveness. She and Antonoff don't try to imitate Mitchell's tricky musical fusions, but they do invoke the finely honed confidentiality of Amos' music, and similar moods cultivated by other women in the 1990s, when Mitchell served as a beacon lighting many different approaches to the singer-songwriter role. (Fiona Apple is another obvious source of inspiration.) These artists made spaces where women could share complicated thoughts and otherwise unspoken feelings, using tools traditionally associated with the feminine: piano, lyric poetry, a voice cultivated by singing hymns and lullabies. The most straightforward songs on *NFR!* have that morning-light quality: a woman sitting at a keyboard, singing what she needs to say.

But as winning as those moments are, they aren't what makes Lana Del Rey an interesting artist. The power of *NFR!* emanates from another source: her compulsion to collapse logic, to violate boundaries musically, through imagery and within her storytelling. This is not only about Del Rey's persona as a bad girl to whom bad things are done; her supposed confessions would be nothing more than reality-show fodder if not for the way she and her collaborators construct them. On their own, taken song by song, her lyrics – even in the full flower *NFR!* represents – often read as unremarkable and derivative. What hooks the listener is the way she enacts her dramas just as the mind replays formative memories, especially painful ones. She repeats herself. She

veers into cliché. Her touchstones fall into each other across time. Many people have called *NFR!* a 1970s throwback, but its songs barely dip into that era's experimental sounds, instead touching down in the baroque-pop 1960s, the cyborg 1980s and the G-Funk 1990s without distinguishing between its reference points. And its lyrics, as always with Del Rey, similarly recombine references, not to make them fresh, exactly — no shout-out to Sylvia Plath can feel new, not since about 1981 – but to put them in our faces as old friends, old adversaries.

Take "Cinnamon Girl," one of the new album's deep cuts. The title's a mildly clever cop from a Neil Young classic, and the first line, "cinnamon in my teeth from your kiss," takes you somewhere. But then? There's a line about different colored pills, alluding to her sweetheart's addiction, and one about her frustration becoming like fire. B-plus poetics. There's some moaning about how no one has "held me without hurting me," and half-formed thoughts about words she cannot speak. Compare this vague non-story to four lines randomly pulled from Mitchell's 1972 song about her then-lover James Taylor's heroin habit, "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire," written when she was five years younger than Del Rey is now: *Concrete concentration camp / Bashing in veins for peace / Cold blue steel and sweet fire / Fall into Lady Release*.

Mitchell's lyric reads as poetic and incisive. Next to it, Del Rey's feels uncooked. Musically, "Cold Blue Steel" also strikes the listener as much more sophisticated, with its subtle arrangement and a melody that sinuously moves from folk to jazz.

Yet let Del Rey's song sink in, and it offers its own revelations — sensual and emotional, like Mitchell's, but less clearly mediated. The simplicity and directness of "Cinnamon Girl" hits as its leaden rhythm seems to grow more elastic. A syn-drum keeps the narcotized time as a string section puddles around it. Del Rey moans her lyrics in a small voice, almost pleading but also self-soothing. Sometimes she makes a trilling leap that sounds like the squiggle of one of the vintage synths Antonoff employs — a sign of her indebtedness to West Coast hip-hop, whose smudged arrangements and stoned cadences she often assimilates. Sometimes all the song's effects fall away, only to push forward again; there doesn't seem to be much order to the dynamics. The whole effect is slippery, unattached to the process of telling a story. The song feels more like you're *in* a story, in someone's head at a particularly unsure

moment. A great songwriter, as we tend to understand that role, would offer a more coherent view. But for Del Rey, the mash-up of affects and references is the point. It is emotion's actuality.

The principles that direct Del Rey's artistic practice are embedded within a particular cultural lineage — though perhaps it's more accurate to call it a tendency. We can think of this inheritance as one aspect of the American Dream, though not in the usual sense of that phrase. It's more like America's dream life, its psychic swamp, its nocturnal emissions. The 20th century saw the development of a scientific language designed to shed light on this realm, one that is unique to each person but also shared, culturally shaped and individually rearranged. Artists responded, differently every decade, forming a timeline that connects European Surrealism to American horror and *noir*, free-associative jazz improvisation to the transgressions of post-punk. Lana Del Rey took this lineage to heart as a teen named Lizzy Grant and created a character through which she could explore it. At first, she followed her impulses and landed on clichés: She was a bad, bad, girl, "born to die." But even then, there was power in her commitment. Over time she has developed the ability to step back from her compulsions, and though she still finds power in them — *NFR!*, like all of her albums, remains a repository of masochistic out-breaths and bad-girl flexes — she has become curious about how this language formed and why it speaks to her.

YouTube

As virtually everyone who's commented on her work has noted, Del Rey accesses the twin realms of Surrealism and the psychoanalytic most often through their cinematic manifestations, particularly film noir and its latter-day revival, especially within the work of David Lynch. To adopt a noir style is not original, but Del Rey has outdone her rivals in this arena by going deeper into its essence — that phenomenon of slippage that also defines her music. Noir is Surrealism unleashed in the city, amidst its noise and grime and electric-lamp shadows. Like that art movement, it privileges psychic interiority over other aspects of experience. In a film like Edward G. Ulmer's 1945 noir *Detour*, in which a man kills a woman because she is blackmailing him, but also because he can no longer stand to hear the sound of her voice, the crisis leading up to the murder is depicted as a visceral assault on his senses, the pressure of his situation magnifying everything and eventually leading to disaster. That's just one example. The most powerful scenes in Lynch's films often build to a similar level of disorientation, with characters morphing into monsters for a moment, or being absorbed into rips in the time-space continuum. These baffling scenes affect the viewer because they express the ways stress and a trauma can reconstitute a person's internal life.

It's easy to read the Del Rey's map of the *noir* landscape, but just as enlightening to consider how her musical precedents set the stage for the work she's doing. West Coast rappers and producers have tread similar ground for decades: A playlist of songs that lay deeply embedded within the Lana Del Rey aesthetic would include Cypress Hill's "How I Could Just Kill A Man," with its insights into the mood of murder, and Warren G's "Regulate," a drifter's tale as redolent of menace and magic as any of Lynch's scenes. Those sources linger like friendly ghosts on *NFR!*, as do Kim Gordon's explorations of the abject in Sonic Youth – the tenderness she brought to Karen Carpenter's story in "Tunic" prefigured Del Rey's faded warmth in "How To Disappear." If this album signals the peak of Del Rey's singer-songwriter period, it's worth remembering that her first debts were to hip-hop and post-punk, and noticing how crucial those sources remain even as she nods more noticeably toward Laurel Canyon.

"Beloved imagination," Andre Breton wrote in the manifesto that, in 1924, announced

Surrealism's intent, "what I like most in you is your unsparing quality." We live in a time when the interpretation of dreams has given way to psychopharmaceutical rebalancing, and when the neatening effects of self-actualization are generally considered more rewarding than the dwelling on the psyche's dark expanse. Recently, though, in the music of young artists like Billie Eilish and Logic, in the podcast-driven true crime craze and the work of women auteurs like Joanna Hogg and writers like Elena Ferrante, that expanse has again come into view. Lana Del Rey began her inquiries there. She is a creature born of trauma, possibly literally, if you take Lizzy Grant's teenage experiences with addiction into account; but certainly aesthetically. At its best, her music absorbs and disorients. It calls for interpretation, but in the most personal sense of the word – it wants to be crazily loved or angrily hated. It wants to trigger you.

NFR! still allows for that seductive uneasiness. It surfaces in the long outro to "Venice Bitch," a psychotropic soak that buries the chorus of the bubblegum drug trip "Crimson and Clover" in reverb, guitar noodling and Del Rey's voice murmuring a line that smudges the line between tenderness and obsession: *If you weren't mine, I'd be jealous of your love*. Even as she learns the comforts of coherence and closure, Del Rey still knows there's something to learn from the weird and the wrong.

Lana Del Rey

More Stories From NPR

The Fake as More

By SARAH NICOLE PRICKETT

Lana's look is not to make it look easy

IN 2011, Lana Del Rey showed up to the chillwave party with flowers in her hair and a video she'd made herself. She was awkward, a pity guest tugging at the hem of her hand-me-down dress. She didn't know how to do eyeliner. The video—for "Video Games"—looked something like a camcorder montage played at an early funeral, and something like a collection of messages left on Skype for a long-distant lover, and then like something less altogether, a naive and half-stoned distraction from full-time basement life. Singer and video both were accused of the ultimate high school don'ts: "being fake" and "trying" (the new "selling out"). In response, Lana shrugged and said that really, she should've tried harder. "Had I known so many people were going to watch [it]," she told *The Daily Star* in 2012, "I'd have put some more effort into it. I would have got my hair and makeup done and tried not to be so pouty, seeing as everyone talks about my face all the time."

That year in fashion, the yen for pastels reached a zenith, and few stars went paler than Lana. I remember trying the trend, sort of—I'd bleached my hair to death in 2010, then infused it with lavender, rose—but when it came to clothes that matched, I felt ridiculous. I balked at what I then called "the bad girl gone *Lula*" look, which a "hazily pastiched" Del Rey embodied

in and around her "Video Games" fame. I didn't care if her lips were fake; I cared that the cigarette between them went unsmoked. (As a failed evangelical Christian, I have never understood why anyone would *pretend* to have sin.) Her songs I liked, but the outfits bored me: stiff, prim, and so often *pastel*, a hue synonymous with sweetness and artificiality. Pastels, and the Pleasantville styles they come in, also connote (to me) an anodyne, ladylike feminism that prizes smartness and self-righteousness at the expense of not only sex appeal but those who use it to win, as if brains are any less a thing of luck and cultivation than bodies, or as if the average intellect is any less artificial than (allegedly) Lana's lips or Lana's nose.

I find it funny-sad-true that in trying to look "smart," she basically just dressed "non-slutty": Google-image "Lana Del Rey 2011" and "Lana Del Rey 2012," and you'll get gowns to the floor, shirts buttoned all the way up, fuzzy sweaters, and cinch-waisted frocks. She dyed her Lizzy Grant–era, Britney-blonde hair a respectable, honeyed shade of brown. She lowered her voice, because "people didn't take [her] seriously with a high one," but then they didn't trust her femininity with a low one. So she sang "Blue Velvet" but wore strawberry pink and mint green, peach and lemon and violet. And white—never white like a bride, but white like the girl who wears white to someone else's wedding.

Why was Lana never believable as a Kennedy, whether she was playing Jackie or dressing like Carolyn Bessette? Because she was in on the joke. At 14, she was sent to Kent School, the 19th most expensive private high school in America; famous graduates include composers, actors, opera singers, Meryl Streep's daughter, and a "yachting cinematographer and lecturer." When she left to go sing about it (see: the painfully pre-fame "Boarding School," 2009) she knew exactly what she was running away from; when she sang about "doing crack and drinking Pepsi," she was announcing herself as the anti–Diet Cokehead. The kind of girl she grew up against is classy, symmetrical, "well off" (not "rich"), and thin; her beauty labor is 90 percent hidden, an alembic of genes and expense. She gets $900 blonde highlights, $140 blowouts, and $18 juices, goes in for daily personalized workouts and twice-weekly facials, and spends an hour a day taking vitamins, only to smile apologetically and say, "I swear, it's just lip gloss and Touche Éclat." Meanwhile, Lana came out looking like she spent more time on her face than in bed.

Accordingly, *Born to Die* (2012) took a *Blue Velvet*-ier direction. But for the album's Pepsi-colored cover shoot, and for most of that year's concerts, acceptances, and appearances, Lana put on a Sunday look she couldn't altogether pull off. Pale prep revivalism made Taylor Swift look like a debutante, and Lana Del Rey like a runaway in shoplifted trends. Both Taylor and Lana are former tomboys with loaded dads and blue-collar origin stories. But Lana, dressed like a sweetheart, was nobody's.

Not until the video for "Ride," with its naive Amer-arcana and manic declaration of independence, did my impression make sense of the rest. Lana's whiteness had never been innocent, or wasn't now; her look was suddenly so conscious, so caricaturing of its influences that I could have sworn she was appropriating whiteness. The dresses had never been "daddy's girl," but "daddy's *little* girl." I was wrong about the cigarettes, too. *Fader*'s cover story has her "chain-smoking Parliaments," a brand nobody buys to look cool, and her speaking voice is first-hand proof. Sober for a decade, she still sings about whiskey and "white lines." She has never been spotted near a gym. Nor has she ever "opened up" about her weight, in regard to which she's one of the less bothered pop stars alive. As seen in *Tropico*, Lana's body is ripe, trembling, and defiantly unmaintained, a body as far out of time as her voice.

Because she seems not to take care of herself (that unfairest of modern mandates), Lana's beauty is both laborious and ad hoc. It's fake nails, false eyelashes, and lashings of powder and kohl. Her hair, which has always looked dyed from a box, is now the nightshade hue of *Secret* nylons. Just as her reply to "trying too hard" on "Video Games" was to try a lot harder—her colors more and more saturated over the course of *Born to Die*—so too, now that she's famous enough to get her makeup done for a bodega trip, does she refuse the kind of Beyoncé-level mask that looks (but isn't) effortless, or even good, up close (see: her *Fader* cover shoot, in which the cameras get hi-def and the makeup stays lo-def). The message is clear: Stay your distance. Or maybe: I can't bear my skin, but also: Who the fuck are you to think you're entitled to the "real" me? She looks suprareal. She looks … exhausting.

"I wish I was dead already," she says, but "I wish I was dead" was already sung on "Dark Paradise," and we (the media) didn't freak out two years ago. We either did not hear or did not take seriously the lyric. Failed to believe she had written it, assumed she herself did not believe it, we are trained to think of the pop star's persona as safely removed from the person, the same way we recast as "fantasy" what we're afraid to say we really, really want. I too think this of most personas, but not of Lana's. I think, What if Lana did fuck her way to the top? What if she was hit? What if she liked it? What if her pussy tastes exactly like cola? And if all she wants is dope and diamonds, so what? What if the most radical—fuck it, feminist—thing you can do is believe everything a girl says about her life, whether or not you like it?

Two years ago, the prevailing (male) establishment didn't like it one bit. Reviews had Lana looking not all that dark, only noir: a vamp, a tramp, the new *Blue Angel*, accused of luring lonesome crowds of indie boys from their shitty lo-fi principles. The *New York Times*'s Jon Caramanica called her a poser, a meme, and a has-been, suggesting she could only try again by "wash[ing] off that face paint" and "muss[ing] up that hair." In other words, Lana Del Rey should do a better job of *passing*—of being a "natural woman."

Instead, Lana has replaced Anna Nicole Smith as the reigning "faux queen," a former blue-jean baby whose rejection of upwardly mobile feminism and/or high-class femininity in favor of fatalistic glamour and female-to-female drag makes her a gender deserter to some, but a godsend to most, because at least she never makes it look easy. And what a relief. When straight girls and women are meant to choose between chic, studied effortlessness (creative upper class/Manhattan) and tweely aestheticized failure (creative underclass/Brooklyn), Lana's truth is way, way in between: Being a man-loving woman is not an identity; it's a job. It's a glamorous job, but the hours are long and there's often no future and it sucks, it scars, and it hardens, and it's hard. (Here I admit that it's tempting to read "man" unliterally, as something big and impossible to get out from—drugs, fame, money, a whole damn country. In melodramatic pop songs, almost any relation is easier read as a relationship.)

Against the glistening "unlistenable" void of *Ultraviolence*, its clamor and glitz and classless, naked aspiration (shared also by the best songs on *Born to Die*), Lana's old pastels seem cold in a newish light. Everything Ambien blue, Paxil pink, Oxycodone mint. Celexa peach, Klonopin yellow, Wellbutrin violet—the "violet pills" she sings of in a bonus track, maybe … but she's off it all now. Gone are the prescriptive hits. Gone the flowers. Everything fades to bruise, until: the cover of *Ultraviolence* is her in black and white with a white car and a white simple V-neck over a white, visible bra, as if to say, "Is this real enough for you?" It's strange. No one has ever looked less comfortable in a T-shirt. For a week I couldn't figure it out, and then I thought: She looks like a patient escaping. TNI

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CULTURAL COMMENT

LANA DEL REY'S NEW WAY OF SEEING

By Jia Tolentino August 1, 2017

CULTURAL COMMENT

HOW WE CAME TO LIVE IN "CURSED" TIMES

through a narrow set of intertwined cultural tropes. In "Blue Jeans" and "Video Games," the D.I.Y. music videos that made her famous, Del Rey intercut Webcam clips of herself with archival footage of American iconography: palm trees, Vegas neon, roses blooming, police, paparazzi, the Stars and Stripes. (These days, on Instagram, she often murmurs her music into the front-facing camera of her phone.) She pouted as she sang, wearing lace and gold and crosses, looking like a self-composed collage. She was a moll, a starlet, a Stepford wife—a "gangster Nancy Sinatra," as she herself put it. She seemed so aware of the image she was creating that, to many, she inevitably seemed fake.

But artifice is not the same thing as dishonesty. Forty years before social media would lend a new dimension to his thesis, Berger wrote that a woman's "own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another"—namely, by a male viewer. Women, Berger argued, live in a state of self-consciousness that is at once artificial and authentic to the world we live in. He offers two images for comparison: the 1814 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres painting "La Grande Odalisque" and a photo from a nineteen-sixties girlie magazine. "Is not the expression remarkably similar in each case?" he asks. "It is the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her—although she doesn't know him." It is an expression that Del Rey wears as she

stares at the camera in those early videos. She controlled the process, unlike the women in those images; but, like them, she was "offering up her femininity as the surveyed," as Berger put it. As tends to happen, she was both rewarded and punished for doing so.

My favorite Del Rey song is the demo version of "National Anthem," a song that appeared on her début album, "Born to Die," from 2012. The album cut is a sweeping, kitschy, string-section fantasia; its opening sounds like the Verve's "Bittersweet Symphony." The demo is rougher, with a crunchy, grinding beat and a Joan Jett bass line. In the D.I.Y. video that accompanies it, Del Rey dances in a dress that looks like a cupcake, singing for the camera between clips of Elvis, fireworks, and Air Force One. She's isolated—she has the look of someone who's locked herself in a hotel room—and she wears that expression again, luxuriating in the pleasure of her own image as viewed by an as-yet-imaginary audience. "He will do very well / I can tell, I can tell / Keep me safe, in his bell tower, hotel," she sings. She has fully allied her performance with the idea that, as Berger wrote, women are "born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men."

That video was leaked in June, 2012, shortly before the release of the official video—a seven-minute production in which Del Rey plays both Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy to A$AP Rocky's J.F.K. It is a hyper-specific distillation of American romance: golden late afternoon on Chappaquiddick; champagne and diamonds; blue hydrangeas, red dresses, endless green lawns. Visually and lyrically, the imagery is simple: rich men and beautiful women; freedom through submission—"wind in my hair / hand on the back of my neck." Del Rey's two governing aesthetics, love and country, collapse into each other completely. "Tell me I'm your national anthem," she pleads on the chorus, repeating the line as the chords shift to sudden, unnerving euphoria. If Del Rey's entire project is an experiment in all-encompassing narrative obedience, this song is proof of concept to me. The national anthem is as

good a metaphor as any for the blind, binding pledges of romantic love.

Throughout the last six years, Del Rey has remained fixated almost exclusively on love and America, and her favored references touch on both things simultaneously. "My pussy tastes like Pepsi-Cola / My eyes are wide like cherry pies," she sings on "Cola," from her 2012 EP "Paradise." Including the large cache of demos from the period when she was performing under her given name, Lizzy Grant, you'd be hard-pressed to find a Del Rey song that doesn't mention fireworks, cherries, diamonds, Hollywood, guns, roses, or driving around and getting high. This was a dreamy, degraded way of looking at things; until "Lust for Life," her new album, a certain set of idols—money, beauty, violence, oblivion—ran the show.

Particularly on her first two albums, Del Rey seemed so fully committed to a posture of submission that critics and other listeners, in an age when women's empowerment has gone fully mainstream, seemed alternately disgusted and enthralled. "I've got a taste for men who are older / It's always been, so no surprise," she sings on "Cola." Later in the song, she rhymes "I fall asleep in an American flag" with "I pledge allegiance to my dad." She sees herself through the eyes of her married love interest: "All he wants to do is party with his pretty baby." On "Sad Girl," another song about a married man, from her third album, "Ultraviolence," she's "his Bonnie on the side, his money on the side." The entire chorus of another "Ultraviolence" track is Del Rey repeating, "I'm pretty when I cry."

Of course, she's not alone in looking at herself. Pop music by women, especially lately, is marked by self-surveillance of the sort that Berger had in mind. At the peak of her perfect single "Teenage Dream," Katy Perry sings, "Imma get your heart racing,in my skintight jeans / Be your teenage dream tonight." Most of Taylor Swift's oeuvre is a reimagining of the ways that other people see her: "Say you'll remember me / Standing in my nice dress, staring

at the sunset, babe." What distinguished Del Rey was that dark, unnerving, submissive quality. She was deliberately playing with the narratives she drew from; nonetheless, she seemed content to mold herself into well-worn stories, to pay tribute to retrograde ideas of power. Women are often asked to do those things. So are citizens.

"Lust for Life" marks a shift in Del Rey's approach, though not in her interests. The libidinous energy of "Born to Die" has mellowed; the psychedelic reverie of 2014's "Ultraviolence" and 2015's "Honeymoon" has cleared away. For the first time, Del Rey isn't figuring herself as the protagonist but as the narrator. The first couplet of the album, on the gorgeous and magnanimous single "Love," is, "Look at you kids, with your vintage music / Coming through satellites while cruising." On much of the album she sounds like a fairy godmother, a good witch of the West Coast—surveying, at age thirty-two, a younger subset of people who seem as beautiful and delicate and helpless as she once felt herself to be. There's a quiet, open, old-fashioned simplicity in some of her lyrics: "Maybe my contribution / Could be as small as hoping / That words would turn to birds / And birds would send my thoughts your way." She is just as romantic, but her view of love has opened up. It's no longer a sexually charged power play between two stylized ideas of a man and a woman. It's just love.

And what about America? Del Rey's thematic fixations have always allowed her to merge disparate eras: she draws on thirties fake-book melodies, sixties surf-rock reverb, and contemporary hip-hop production, chromatically aligning everything with her deep romantic bent. These days, however, America's past feels treacherous and its future alarming—romance doesn't fit well with one of her primary subjects anymore. Del Rey has spoken about the Trump era in interviews, sometimes vaguely and sometimes sharply. She changed her tour visuals, she told Pitchfork: instead of the American flag, which she loves, she'd "rather have static," she said. I appreciate the simplicity of this position; at a time when other artists are working overtime to muster a cogent thesis about America, Del Rey is letting her instinct for doom and darkness trouble the waters. At Pitchfork, Meaghan Garvey described "Lust for Life" as a *vanitas* painting about America. The images have changed: the beaches are black, the roses are burning. The flag looks like static, and a collective ruin seems to be at hand. Del Rey is getting out from under the narratives that have determined her. She is starting to work as if she's seeing things rather than being seen.

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The Meaning of Lana Del Rey

Pop culture, post-feminism and the choices facing young women today

By Catherine Vigier

The criticism leveled against pop singer Lana Del Rey on the Internet and in the mainstream press raises a number of questions about young women choosing to conform to the image required of them by the corporate media in order to achieve success, and about the conditions under which success can be achieved in the culture industries and elsewhere. This raises further questions: about the power of the corporate media and its capacity to control cultural products and establish norms, and about the choices open to young women—whether to exploit their sexual assets in order to make it to the top, or to refuse these pressures and risk remaining unknown. These pressures are also faced by young women attempting to find work or build a career in other areas. Personal relationships are squeezed and put under pressure, too, and satisfying relationships are difficult to maintain at a time when both men and women need relief from the harsh competition of the marketplace

This essay will argue that Lana Del Rey's music gives some expression to the lived experience of her audience, and to the aspirations of that audience. Through an analysis of Del Rey's songs and videos, it will also be argued that she is representing and speaking to a contradiction facing thousands of young women today, women who have followed mainstream society's prescriptions for success in what has been called a post-feminist world, but who find that real liberation and genuine satisfaction elude them.

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Working for long hours and for relatively low pay and still having responsibility for household management, many women have little free time or money. Images that suggest romance or escape are thus extremely attractive.

The rise and trashing of Lana Del Rey

In 2011 an aspiring singer-songwriter named Lizzie Grant ditched her name and her tarty look and staged a marketing relaunch that allowed her to rise to the heights of stardom. The singer, born in New York City and raised in Lake Placid, had begun her musical career singing in bars. After various failed attempts to break into the popular music market she signed a contract with Stranger records in June 2011. Her debut single was called "Video Games," and it was the home-made video of this song that went viral on YouTube and brought her overnight success.[*] She, now Lana Del Rey, was immediately signed by Polydor Records and Interscope, home to Madonna and Lady Gaga. Her album *Born to Die* was released in January 2012 and topped the charts in eleven countries including France, the UK, and Australia, along the way winning the 2012 Brit awards for Best Breakthrough Act in the UK.

The backlash against this assemblage—backlash from bloggers and Internet users, but also, significantly, in the *New York Times* and other mainstream print media—focused on Del Rey's surgically enhanced lips and her false retro look, which outraged many who believe art is synonymous with authenticity. The arguments were that this Lana Del Rey lacked talent and was simply the product of a corporate marketing machine. Her millionaire daddy, Robert Grant, was said to have bankrolled her rise to fame.

At first glance, the criticism of Grant-Del Rey's music seems to echo the arguments made by Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School, writing in the 1940s.[1] Adorno pointed to the way in which corporate interests controlled and defined the production of music and other popular arts. Popular music is standardized and pre-planned in order to elicit a series of predictable and controllable responses on the part of the consumer, he argued. Adorno's pessimism grew as the experience of National Socialism darkened his perspective on humanity's capacity to resist the propaganda offensives of the military-industrial complexes that dominated Western governments. In 1944 he and his colleague Max Horkheimer suggested that culture now assumed the role of providing social cohesion which had formerly been provided by religion.

[*] To view, see Video Games.

Adorno and Horkheimer's insistence on the homogeneity of many cultural products, on the fact that we can scarcely distinguish advertising from editorial text, seems particularly true today. Yet there is a difficulty with this emphasis on the overwhelming power of the culture industries. Popular culture, in order to be successful and win audiences, must express in some way people's lived experiences. Even religion, if it is to channel people's aspirations toward the hereafter, must give expression to feelings of injustice, anguish and desire for a better world. Thus popular culture is a more complex affair than Horkheimer and Adorno made it out to be. The stars that are co-opted by the music industry are also particularly adept at expressing the sentiments of listeners—and usually at channeling these sentiments into harmless outlets such as the search for Romantic Love. Yet sometimes, in some ways, popular music can challenge the established ways of seeing, feeling and thinking about life. This can happen regardless of the intentions of the artists, as is suggested by Bob Dylan's hostility to the idea that he represented or expressed the aspirations of a particular social movement or generation.

This does not mean that the music is necessarily revolutionary. Singers can express deep unhappiness while embracing the conditions that give rise to that unhappiness. So, for example, Greil Marcus argues that country music could never be a symbol of social change in 1950s America. For Marcus, country music expressed the fatalism of poor whites and helped them feel more comfortable with accepting their lot. From the Carter family to Hank Williams and Patsy Cline, country music could only accompany the suffering of the poor, only bring momentary relief, without any hope of change.[2]

By contrast, and not wishing to suggest that Del Rey's music is radical or progressive (which I do not believe that it is), I would argue that it gives expression to some of the profound dissatisfactions that women continue to feel. In particular it speaks to a sense that freedom has not really been achieved and to a particular ambivalence about the kinds of relationships that seem required of women in need of either economic or emotional support.

While the backlash against Del Rey's music has taken the form of questioning her authenticity, accusing her of being a product of corporate, commercial pop music, it is difficult to see why she has been singled out in this respect. All producers of popular music are obliged to sign contracts with the big record companies who dictate the compromises they must make in order to be "saleable." This was as much the case for the Beatles in the 1960s as it is for the wannabe stars of today. The point is that those

who maintain and expand their popularity manage to continue to express something that is felt by their audiences, even while selling that feeling back in cultural products that do anything but challenge the status quo. What was astonishing about the media backlash, which began before the release of her album, was how international it was. *Le Figaro*, a conservative paper, quoted unfavorable comments on Del Rey from French journals of differing persuasions—e.g., *Le Parisien*, *Le Monde*, and *Le Point*—and also from the British *Telegraph* and *Guardian* and even the *Michigan Daily* student newspaper. One *Figaro* music critic was quoted as saying that "*Video Games*" had "given birth to a monster." The *Figaro* writer then added that the positive points of Del Rey's album "could be counted on the fingers of one hand," even though she did have the potential to become a great artist.[3] An early photo in *L'Express* magazine was accompanied by the helpful information that Del Rey was known as "duckface" to insiders.

Nostalgia for Disempowerment?

The press has claimed to be only repeating what was said on the Internet by certain bloggers, but the extent of the backlash raises questions as to what is really the problem with Del Rey? One of the problems is that, after a decade in which women were told that they had everything it took to get ahead, and that the playing-field was somehow level in our new, post-feminist world, it was disturbing to many to see a woman recast herself as an old-fashioned male fantasy and to seemingly embrace submissiveness, and to dress as if she were nostalgic for the days before women's liberation. (Although back in those days a pop star might not have taken off her clothes for a magazine— *GQ*—when it voted her woman of the year.) Submissiveness, nostalgia and a tendency to indulge in self-destructive behavior are the hallmarks of Del Rey's persona. Sometimes this comes down to the clothes she wears. *The Observer* music critic Kitty Empire wrote, "Her floaty trousers, not seen since a '60s convention of Stepford wives, sweep the ground so that it looks like the alluring, infuriating Lana Del Rey is walking on air." Empire concluded by saying that Del Rey "takes as her stylistic template a kind of pre-feminist Americana halfway between suburban perfection and the trailer park"[4]

Although female submissiveness, particularly of the sexual variety, has been making a comeback in various forms of pop culture (for example in the S&M of *Fifty Shades of Gray*), Del Rey has been particularly criticized for this aspect of her persona. Various critics have argued that she undermines the notion that women can be powerful if they use their skills and assets to their own advantage. The idea of empowerment was

articulated within conservative feminism in the 1990s and became quite influential. In her 1993 book *Fire with Fire* Naomi Wolf argued that what women needed was to embrace "power feminism."[5] Women needed to show their power, and if they were strong enough as individuals they could achieve equality. This meant learning from stars with high media profiles, people like Madonna, Spike Lee or Bill Cosby. If you didn't like your group's image in the media, you had to decide on another image and to seize the means of producing it. Women's liberation seemingly came down to a series of choices about image, lifestyle and sexual expression.[6] As journalist Charlotte Raven wrote in *The Guardian*:

> In this model, power could be taken on, like a mortgage, after due consideration. Everyone could sign up for it. Those who chose not to may have had some perverse attachment to their "downtrodden", "sorry victim" status. The rest would opt for life as a "laughing, independent, ambitious optimist."[7]

The important thing was to express a confident, upbeat image, and to abandon any image that suggested victimhood. As music critic Paul Rice wrote in *Slant* on-line magazine:

> Even casual top 40 listeners have become conditioned to the almost bludgeoning sense of self-empowerment in pop music today. . . . Nowhere else in mass culture have young people, especially women, been allowed to feel so unvexed about their desires, even if those desires are constrained to the relatively superficial, glitter-sprayed longings of a Ke$ha rager: "We're taking control/We've got what we want/We do what you don't."[8]

Del Rey doesn't fit this model. For Rice, this is because Del Rey sings as a woman who does not know what she wants. For some commentators, this is a negation of "girl power." As student Hallie Chen commented on a San Francisco blog, "There is a particular visual language that her 'Lolita lost in the ghetto' look attempts to deploy that is saturated in nostalgia for disempowerment."[9]

Del Rey's harshest critics have thus accused her of being anti-feminist. Music critic Ann Powers has said that the singer's persona is based on the allure of the *femme fatale* but without the "girl power update." Women found Del Rey troubling, she argued, because they saw in her the worst aspects of being a girl.[10] *The Atlantic*'s entertainment editor, Spencer Kornhaber, saw Del Rey as being unique, and odd, in her "retro gospel of stereotypical, codependent, frivolous girlishness." He goes on to add that while pop music has not abandoned sexism or a gendered world view, its major feminine icons have more recently depicted women as willful and, indeed, empowering all sorts of people to "act and think independently."[11]

Freedom and self-exploitation in the post-feminist world

Wolf's idea of empowerment, which suggests that liberation is a question of advantageously deploying one's assets, intellectual, social, sexual or otherwise, goes hand in hand with the idea that the only thing preventing true equality for women is their own lack of initiative and their inability to seize the chances offered them. This dovetailed nicely with the consumer spending booms of the 1990s and early 2000s, and this idea of dress freedom as synonymous with women's liberation has been used by neoconservatives like Laura Bush to justify Western governments' repeated military interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere, in part in order to "liberate" women whose oppression is symbolized by their dress. Western women, on the other hand, are considered to have all the freedom they need. The corollary of this is that women who fail to compete with men on equal terms and who demand rights such as paid maternity leave are considered to be taking unfair advantage. This attitude was reflected in former French justice minister Rachida Dati's returning to ministerial meetings just a few days after giving birth by Cesarean section. Women don't need maternity leave was the implicit message.

This impatience with "girly girls" and "victims" is perfectly described by Ariel Levy in her 2006 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*.[12] Women who want to get on are encouraged to identify with men, to see themselves as exceptions to the rule, as the ones who by sheer effort of will are not going to be held back by their femininity, but who are going to succeed on equal terms with men, if necessary by joining with men in the deriding of other girls. This worldview encourages contempt for women who come across as victims (e.g., the people Ronald Reagan called "welfare queens"), but can also be extended to women who complain about sexism. Madonna's success in the 1980s coincided with a determined struggle by some feminists to shift feminism's agenda toward personal empowerment and a focus on individual, as opposed to collective progress. This position was also put forward by conservative cultural critics and anti-feminists such as Camille Paglia, who argued in one *New York Times* article that "Madonna was the future of feminism."[13]

Madonna's success also coincided with the liberalization of the porn industry, which flooded our lives with a constant stream of images of sexual behavior at its most alienated. Madonna could claim to be at the cutting edge of sexual liberation, for she was apparently liberating herself by breaking all the old taboos that had prevented people

from enjoying sex before. You didn't need to be a feminist anymore to reach for liberation. All you needed was to express your sexuality. This had the built-in advantage of being a way to get ahead. Women celebrities were gaining more social recognition than, for example, women athletes or scientists. As Ariel Levy pointed out, successful women had to be sexy, too, if they wanted recognition. A line between sexual liberation and self-exploitation disappeared. While greater openness about sexual matters was obviously a good thing, it encouraged the idea that nothing else was required. We could now talk about a post-feminist society in which women could compete on equal terms with men.

In Lana Del Rey's work, however, despite the sexual freedom expressed in her videos, there is a persistent sense of frustration, dissatisfaction and longing. She personally has been successful, but by representing a loser in her songs and videos. What many listeners have taken from the sad, haunting melody of "Video Games" is the way in which she dresses up for her boyfriend when he comes over, and how he nonetheless ignores her and focuses on his video game. We understand that both her sexual desire and her desire to be noticed are frustrated, and we can note that withholding sex is a form of sadistic behavior in certain types of relationships. Clearly, she is trying very hard to get attention in the video but has very little power, sexual or otherwise. This is glossed over in the nostalgia that seems to be a trademark of Del Rey's music.

The success of Del Rey's *Video Games* video must in part be related to the way it portrays a carefree past—in which young people are not performing or striving, but simply larking around, at the swimming pool, skateboarding, or riding motorbikes. They are not dressed up and are not obviously performing for the camera. They are just enjoying themselves.

It is important to remember that video games are played by both men and women, and even though they parallel the real world in the way one has to constantly strive to reach a higher level and compete with other players, the penalties for failure are not as dramatic as those encountered in the world of work. Yet video games and nostalgia are not the only forms of withdrawal from the harsh realities of everyday life. The key one is the search for a personal relationship that will make up for the failures and frustrations encountered elsewhere. The themes of the search for freedom and for the relationship that will save her is particularly evident in Del Rey's most recent release, "Ride" (October 2012). In the ten-minute video she is shown in a cowgirl outfit swinging on a tire in the middle of a countryside which we can identify as typical of the American

West. She tells us an imaginary life-story in her introductory soliloquy, explaining, "It was the winter of my life and the men I met along the way were my only summer."[14]

We see her adopt a number of roles and poses in her search for unity with a male love object. Different men appear to fulfill this role. She adopts the poses of streetwalker and biker girl (or Hell's Angel girlfriend). Her lovers turn out to be men who are considerably older than her. Del Rey has a penchant for exploring the power relationships at play within specific types of sexual relationships, and represents the woman's role as the weaker one. Nonetheless, Del Rey affirms that "my memories of them were my only real happy times."[15] In fact, she seems happier remembering and longing than actually living in the present. Perhaps because of this, Del Rey returns repeatedly to her other theme, that of incipient madness, and acts as if she were crazy, waving a gun around and holding it to her temple. Her advice to her fans at the preview of *Ride* in Santa Monica was this:

> People say your imagination is your greatest tool to success, and I think it's because things manifest in reality from the visions you have in your mind's eye. And so the most important thing is to really have a rich internal world, and live there, because reality will never meet your expectations.

This citation was reported in the *Spin* on-line magazine.[16] It sums up the contradictions in Del Rey's work: the ever-present striving for success, that essential part of the American Dream, which is underscored by her willingness to drape herself in the American Flag and affirm a belief in "the way America used to be." On the other hand, she suggests, we can strive, and indeed we must strive, and still face disappointment. Only a rich inner world can guarantee happiness, apparently. One problem is that having a rich inner world and living there can be the equivalent of madness. The other problem is that the alcohol and drug consumption which Del Rey includes in her songs can remove inhibitions, but this also means giving self-destructive impulses free rein. She herself struggled with alcoholism as a teenager, and talks openly about the problems of drug and alcohol abuse. "[A]t first it's fine and you think you have a dark side—it's exciting—and then you realize the dark side wins every time you indulge in it."[17]

It is important to say that there can be no liberation "in the head" if society is not similarly changed at the same time. There is a heavy price to pay for the retreat into a rich internal world that Del Rey is advocating.

The choices open to women today

In his 2007 novel *After Dark*, Haruki Murakami builds a story around the lives of two sisters. The main one, Mari, is studious and intellectual. She sits in an all-night café reading a book and does not seem terribly interested in men. But she has a beautiful sister who has been groomed for success in the fashion and modeling industries and has done quite well. The sister, however, has problems which lead her to consume drugs and alcohol. As the story unfolds, the sister lies in a deep, coma-like sleep. Her body chooses to opt out of the life to which it has been subjected.

The clear distinction made by Murakami between the fashion-model young woman who takes pills and retreats into a coma, and the studious, competent young woman, who is capable of effective action and exercises control over her destiny, is not so clear in the real world. In reality, women students, too, are under pressure to be glamorous, to use their sexuality as an asset to get ahead, even if this is just to give them a tiny competitive edge. Sex in the post-feminist world is not so much a recreational activity as a way to get ahead. As Nina Power, professor of philosophy at Roehampton University in the United Kingdom emphasizes:

> The sexualisation of contemporary women, from which men are of course not exempt from either, reflects less a freely-chosen desire to express oneself as a fully-rounded sensual being and far more the desperate, yet eminently comprehensible, desire to insert oneself in whatever way possible into a cruel economic structure that will selectively use and value the "assets" of its workers whenever it needs to. We should not be "blaming" women for their complicity in such logic, as if blame were ever a useful political category, but try better to understand it. The hyperreal sexuality of today's culture has as little to do with real libidinal emancipation as contemporary "flexible" work has to do with true human fulfilment.[18]

Escape seems the best option when there does not seem to be any way of changing the situation. Murakami's character falls into a deep sleep, but other forms of withdrawal are at hand for those whose attempts at self-actualization meet with frustration in the real world. Nostalgia for another time is one of the least damaging forms of withdrawal from the present.

With the intense competition of the job market, women are becoming used to the idea that everything they have—even their sexuality—has to go into selling themselves. This idea is reinforced by the images we have of the successful executive woman. As Power reminds us:

> Nevertheless, images of a certain kind of successful woman proliferate—the city worker in heels, the flexible agency employee, the hard-working

> hedonist who can afford to spend her income on vibrators and wine—and would have us believe that—yes—capitalism is a girl's best friend. The demand to be an "adaptable" worker, to be constantly "networking," "selling yourself", in effect, to become a kind of walking cv is felt keenly by both sexes in the developed world."[19]

But the meager rewards on offer for many—and the fact that work has become compulsory for working-class and many middle-class women since their male partners no longer earn what used to be called a family wage—mean that for most women work is not nearly as fulfilling or as attractive as it could be, and is often seen as somewhere to escape from rather than to escape to. Once the family provided the haven that the male worker would return to after a day of tough competition and stress in the workplace. If a woman wants a haven to return to, she has to make it herself. In the song "Born to Die" we hear Del Rey asking her boyfriend if he can "make it feel like home," because she feels so alone on a Friday night.[20] The nuclear family and monogamous relationships gain their strength and appeal from the harshness of the world and working life for both men and women. Even in the era of so-called post-feminism, we can still sense the attraction of the family as a haven in a heartless world.

But, because of the persistence of sexism, most women still come off second best. In "This is What Makes Us Girls", Del Rey talks about girls sticking together because they put love first—and suffering accordingly. The suffering makes them "hate those guys." But suffering can also be proof of investment in a relationship, a form of self-sacrifice. Del Rey's critics have accused her of showing herself about to be strangled by her boyfriend, beaten or bleeding or possibly raped. It is obviously extremely unhealthy to desire being physically attacked or to imagine that this is a normal part of a relationship. Being totally absorbed in a relationship to the exclusion of all else, being obsessed with someone who is clearly the wrong choice is not a good thing. But when Del Rey sings "You're no good for me/but I want you," she may well be expressing the paradoxical feelings of many women, and perhaps men too.

We need to ask why so many women choose to accept abusive relationships and suffering. Part of the answer, at least, may be in the lack of real alternatives. The woman may feel that the roller-coaster emotions that are part of emotionally abusive relationships are a better choice than being alone and abandoned, not to mention the violence some women might face if they did decide to leave.

But talk of a post-feminist society leaves little room for recognition of the persistence of women's oppression. Even today, there is a tendency for society to say that if a woman is subject to violence, then she was in some way responsible for it. We

cannot say that women with morbidly dependent tendencies are responsible for the behavior of those who exploit them. It is important to remember the words of psychoanalyst Karen Horney: morbid dependency "is an outcome of many other factors and not their root."[21] It can be argued that these factors are social and cultural just as much as they are psychological.

In particular, in a society in which the choices facing women are to exploit themselves or go under, we should not be surprised to see some very shocking symptoms appear. According to an article on "Hospitalizations for poisoning by prescription opioids, sedatives and tranquilizers," in the US rates of death from drug overdoses more than doubled for males and tripled for females between 1999 and 2007.[22] The references to morbidly dependent relationships, addiction, self-destruction, mental illness, which appear constantly in the songs of Lana Del Rey or Rihanna, are a reflection of what is going on in the minds and bodies of young people.

Not everybody becomes addicted or gets involved in violent, abusive relationships. But a lot of people have difficulty coping with the material difficulties of life, and this surfaces in different ways in their personal relationships. Feminist writer Susan Faludi has amply documented how economic decline can lead to men feeling like failures, and how this can lead to hostility toward women and sometimes violence. The present economic crisis, which has tended to hit male workers harder than female workers, can only aggravate the illusion that women have it easier, that they can use their sexual assets and communication skills, for example, to get jobs while men are losing out. When economic and social phenomena feed back into intimate lives the results can be disastrous, especially when young people are encouraged not to be aware of these influences on their personal lives and choices.[23]

Neoconservatives argue that it is up to women themselves to overcome the difficulties they face. Individual solutions are consistently put forward and collective ones ruled out. It is hardly surprising that so many young women (and men) escape into alcohol, self-injury and other forms of self-destruction. Their work is boring and routine, and their relationships offer rather more stress and struggle than pleasure. Psychology has named many new conditions and disorders assumed to disproportionately affect women, from borderline personality disorder to masochism, but there is little questioning of the type of society that paves the way for these mental disturbances by blocking off opportunities for real self-development and human growth. On the contrary, even

discussion of the possible alternatives to capitalist society and its destructive mechanisms is discouraged.

One thing is for sure: women's continued, sometimes desperate search for fulfillment outside the world of work reflects disillusionment with post-feminism's message that the only thing holding women back is the limits of their own ambitions. Horney argued that morbid dependency is a form of neurosis, and that so is the search for glory.[24] Are the only paths open to young women today the go-getting, aggressive individualism of the Madonna model, or the Del Rey turn inward that can lead to self-destruction and despair?

While Del Rey has been accused of producing retro trash, it is significant that many of her references are more related to the 1960s than to the 1950s. For all her identification with the victim, if we listen to what Del Rey says, there is no going back to the 1950s and the repressive social climate which then dominated. The connection with the '60s becomes controversial when one considers the video of the song "National Anthem." In this, Lana Del Rey first imitates Marilyn Monroe singing Happy Birthday Mr. President, then imitates Jackie Kennedy in a presidential couple in which JFK is replaced by a black president. The singer and video producer A$AP Rocky plays opposite Lana in a remake of the ideal family. The couple's mixed-race kids gambol on the White House lawn and a multiracial society seems to be really on the agenda.

With this video Del Rey shows the gap that exists between mainstream media discourse and the way in which people live their everyday lives. At least some of the viewers who commented on the *National Anthem* video posted on YouTube said that Lana Del Rey talked about real life and didn't try to pretend that certain things didn't happen.

Looking back to the '60s is not the same as looking back to the '50s. In France, former president Nicholas Sarkozy vowed to wipe out the memory of the '60s, and particularly of the student rebellion and general strike of 1968. Dreaming of a better society, of feeling good and having fun cannot be a bad thing. It might make us want to do something about it, and that is what frightens the neoconservatives.

Conclusion

There are more women looking for fun and a half-decent relationship, and drinking and getting high and playing video games, than there are powering to the top of the corporate ladder in high heels and designer outfits. Mainstream feminism's embrace of the

corporate agenda since the 1980s has meant that it has less and less to say to the women who are not going up. Popular culture, to the extent that it expresses the lived experience of women and girls, is showing that the allegedly post-feminist society, in which woman make choices on the same basis as men, does not exist. Yet the images of women's own experiences as they are reflected in popular culture show that we urgently need an alternative to the present state of affairs. Self-exploitation or self-destruction cannot be the only choices open to young women today. It is important to recognize that as long as the pressures on working women remain at their present intense levels, women and men will be thrown back on traditional forms of relationships which many had hoped were a thing of the past. Capitalism has a way of adapting to changes won in struggles, of integrating them and using them to enslave us even more. Nineteenth-century capitalism reconstituted the working-class family in order to reproduce future generations of workers. But it did so with the accord of men and women who felt that a family wage was better than an entire family working in the mines or in the dark satanic mills. The more women are exploited at work and in the home, the greater the appeal of romantic love as an apparent alternative. Even for women who consider themselves entirely liberated and free.

Endnotes

[1] T.W. Adorno, "On popular music."

[2] Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train* 45.

[3] Mathilde Cesbron, "Lana Del Rey."

[4] Kitty Empire, "Lana Del Rey – Review."

[5] Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire,* 47.

[6] Ibid., 323..

[7] Charlotte Raven, "How the 'new feminism' went wrong."

[8] Paul Rice, "Lana Del Rey's Feminist Problem."

[9] Chloe Roth, "Blahna Del Rey or Lana Del Rage?"

[10] Ann Powers, "Lana Del Rey: Just Another Pop Star."

[11] Spencer Kornhaber, "Lana Del Rey's Regressive, Beautiful, Twisted Fantasy."

[12] Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs,* 101.

[13] Camille Paglia, "Madonna – Finally, a Real Feminist."

[14] Lana Del Rey, "Ride."

[15] Ibid.

[16] Chris Martins, "Born to 'ride'."

[17] Jonathan Heaf, "Lana Del Rey."

[18] Nina Power, "*Capitalism, Consumerism and Feminism*."

[19] Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman*, 23.

[20] Lana Del Rey, "Born to Die," from the album *Born to Die,* 2012.

[21] Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 258.

[22] J.H. Coben et al., "Hospitalizations for poisoning by prescription opioids, sedatives and tranquilizers."

[23] Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Perennial, 1999), 46.

[24] Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 187.

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