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Born To Die: Lana Del Rey, Beauty Queen or Gothic Princess?

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Articles

Closer examination of contemporary art forms including music videos in addition to the Gothic's literature legacy is essential, "as it is virtually impossible to ignore the relationship the Gothic holds to popular culture" (Piatti-Farnell ii). This article critically examines how Gothic themes and modes are used in the music videos of Lana Del Rey; particularly the "ways in which Gothic is dispersed through contemporary non-literary media" (Spooner and McEvoy 2). This work follows the argument laid down by Edwards and Monnet who describe Gothic's assimilation into popular culture —Pop Gothic— as a powerful pop cultural force, not merely a subcultural or cult expression. By interpreting Del Rey's work as a both a component of, and a contributor to, the Pop Gothic advance, themes of social climate, consumer culture, gender identity, sexuality and the male gaze can be interrogated. Indeed the potential for a collective crisis of these issues in early 21st Century western culture is exposed, "the façade of carnivalised surfaces is revealed to hide the chaos and entropy of existential emptiness." (Yeo 17). Gothic modes have been approximated by Pop Gothic into the mainstream (Edwards and Monnet) as a driving force behind these contradictions and destabilisations.

The Gothic has become ubiquitous within popular culture and continues to exert influence. This is easily reflected in the \$392 million the first *Twilight* movie grossed at the box office (Edwards and Monnet). Examples are abundant in pop culture across music, film and television. Edwards and Monnet cite the movies *Zombieland* and *Blade* in the Pop Gothic march, along with TV shows including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Being Human*, *True Blood* as well as Lady Gaga's *Fame Monster* music album. Edwards and Monnet observe that the Gothic aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s, "melancholy and imagery associated with death, dying and the undead" (3), shifted from the corners of subculture to the mainstream of millennial popular culture. With this shift comes the rebelliousness and melancholy that characterises Gothic texts. This is evident when a pop star of Lana Del Rey's popularity —her *Summertime Sadness* video alone has over 160 million views on youtube.com (YouTube)— narratively represents themes of death and suicide repeatedly in her videos. In two of Lana Del Rey's music videos —*Blue Jeans* and *Born to Die*— either she or a representation of her persona dies. In a third video, *Summertime Sadness*, her companion takes her own life and Lana ultimately follows suit.

Themes of death and loss are just the most obvious of Gothic elements present in Del Rey's work. Del Rey's songs and videos speak of the American dream, of aestheticised beauty, of being immaculately presented, well dressed and having hair "beauty queen style", as in *Summertime Sadness*. She depicts an excess of hedonistic consumption and love that knows no bounds, not even death. Much of the delivery has resonance with the Gothic; performatively, visually and musically, and shows a subversion and fatalism that juxtaposes, contests and contradicts pop cultural tropes (Macfarlane). This contrary nature of the Gothic, as characterised by Botting, can provoke a sense of *otherness*; the uncanny, including "displays of uncontrolled passion, violent emotion or flights of fancy to portrayals of perversion or obsession" (*Gothic 2*). It is argued that these characteristics have been commodified into merchandisable and mainstream stylistic representations (Edwards and Monnet). Del Rey's visual work uses this *otherness* and representation of repressed darkness as subversion or contestation to the bubble gum consumerist, fairy tale sexualisation of the Katy Perry brand of neo-liberal pop music that floods the mainstream (Macfarlane). Del Rey also harnesses the Gothic mode in her music, underscoring social anxieties through moments of sound which act as "a sonic imp, this music enters perception through the back door, and there it does its destabilising work" (van Elferen 137).

As potential psychosocial sources of this *otherness* in the Gothic (Botting, *Gothic*), Jung argued that as a collective consciousness by repressing our darkest side, we can be dislocated from it. Further he argued that many modern ills —conflict, war, disenfranchisement, poverty— stem from culturally rationalised divisions of 'good vs evil' (Tacey). Providing a space for these dark sides to surface, Swirski comments that cultural product can act "as a social barometer and a cultural diagnostic tool. It identifies social trends and cultural patterns and weaves elaborate counterfactuals- literary fictions- that hang human faces on large-scale human abstractions such as society and culture" (1).

Jung proposes the large-scale social abstraction; that to truly live with ourselves we need embrace the *otherness* inside us— to learn to live with it (Tacey). The Gothic may enable this living *with*, rather than living without. Jung asserts that we now rely so much on what we can touch, taste and own, that western culture has become a "creed without substance" (Tacey 32). In more concrete terms, HOFFIE argues that popular media today tells stories:

in terms of disaster and crisis: weather patterns: disastrous. Climate Change: disastrous. Global Financial Crisis: disastrous. Political situations: disastrous. Unemployment: disastrous. And so on. The high-pitched wail of this lament corrodes the peaks and troughs of potential emotional responsiveness; the vapours of benumbing apathy steam upwards like a bewitching spell. All stands still. Action, like in a bad dream, seems impossible. (14)

This apathy in the face of crisis or disaster is well expressed in Del Rey's work through the Gothic influenced lyrics and videos; she describes her partner as so good looking as to be "sick as cancer" in *Blue Jeans* and that her lover left her because he was "chasing paper". Represented here is the social current that the need to acquire goods in late capitalism's climate "of unrestrained consumerism" (Heine and Thakur 2) is her lover's priority over companionship. Revealing more of the Gothic aesthetic is that her videos and songs represent this loss, they depict "disturbances of sanity and security" (Botting, *Gothic* 2) and thematically reflect the social climate of "disaster and crisis" (Hoffie 14).

This sense of *otherness* through Gothic influences of the uncanny, death and melancholy have a significant impact on creative expression creating music videos that play like a kind of half remembered nightmare (Botting, *Love Your Zombie*; Macfarlane). In the black and white video for *Blue Jeans* the opening shot shows an image of Del Rey rippling and blurred, framed by circular waves of water as black as oil. The powerful Gothic aesthetic of the *abyss* is rendered here, "to convey the figurative meaning of a catastrophic situation seen as likely to occur whereby the individual will sink to immeasurable intellectual, ethical or moral depths" (Edwards and Monnet 9). This abyss is represented as Del Rey sings to her ghostly tattooed lover that she will love him until "the end of time" and climaxes in the suggestion that he drowns her.

As in Edwards and Monnet's description of zombie films, Del Rey's videos narratively "suggest that the postmodern condition is itself a form of madness that disseminates cultural trauma and erases historical memory" (8). This view is evident in contrasting Del Rey's interview comment that she finds conversations about feminism boring (Cooper). Yet in her song delivery and lyrics she retains an ironic tone regards feminine power. This combination helps "produce a darkly funny and carnivalesque representation of sex and waste under late capitalism" (Edwards and Monnet 8). Further evidence of these ironies and distorted juxtapositions of loss and possession are evident in the song *Radio*. The video—a bricolage of retrospective fashion imagery—and lyrics hint at the persistent desire for goods in US western culture (Heine and Thakur). Simultaneously in her song *Radio*, she is corruptibly engorged by consumption and being consumed (Mulvey) as she sings that life is "sweet like cinnamon, a fucking dream on Ritalin". The video itself represents distorted dreams hyper-real on Ritalin.

Del Rey's work speaks of an *excess*; the overflow of sensations, sexual excess, of buying, of having, of owning, and at the same time the *absence*; of loss or *not knowing* what to have (Botting, *Love Your Zombie*). Exemplified by the lyrics in *What Makes Us Girls*, "do I know what I want?" and again in *Radio* "American dreams came true somehow, I swore I'd chase until I was dead". Increasingly it is evident that Del Rey sings "as a woman who does not know what she wants" (Vigier 5). She illustrates the "endemic narcissism" (Hoffie 15) of contemporary western culture. Del Rey therefore clearly delineates much of "the loneliness, emptiness, and alienation that results from rampant consumerism and materialism under advanced capitalism" (Edwards and Monnet 8).

As a theme of this representation, Del Rey implies a sense of commodified female sexual energy through the male gaze (Mulvey), along with a sense of wasted youth and opportunity in the carnivalesque *National Anthem*. The video, shot as if on Super 8 film, tells the story of Del Rey's 'character' married to a hedonistic style of president. It is reminiscent of the JFK story including authentic and detailed presentation of costume —especially Del Rey's Jackie Onassis fashions— the couple posing in presidential gardens with handsome mixed-race children. Lavish lifestyles are depicted whilst the characters enjoy drinking, gambling and consumerist excess, Del Rey sings "It's a love story for the new age, For the six page, We're on a quick sick rampage, Wining and dining, Drinking and driving, Excessive buying, Overdose and dyin".

In *National Anthem* sexual excess is one of the strongest themes communicated. Repeatedly depicted are distinct close up shots of his hand on her thigh, and vice versa. Without being sexually explicit in itself, it is an overtly sexual reference, communicating something of sexual excess because of the sheer number of times it is highlighted in close-up shots. This links to the idea of the Gothic use of *jouissance*, a state of:

excessive energies that burst in and beyond circuits of pleasure: intensities are read in relation to a form of subjectivity that finds itself briefly and paradoxically in moments of extreme loss. (Botting, *Love Your Zombie* 22)

Del Rey represents these moments of loss —of herself, of her man, of her power, of her identity being subsumed by his— as intense pleasure, indicated in the video through sexual referencing. Botting argues that these excesses create anxieties; that in the pursuit of postmodern excess, of ownership, of consumption:

the subject internalises the inconsistencies and contradictions of capitalism, manifesting pathologies not of privation but overabundance: stress, eating disorders, self-harming, and a range of anxieties. (*Love Your Zombie* 22)

These anxieties are further expressed in *National Anthem*. Del Rey sings to her lover that he cannot keep his "pants on" and she must "hold you like a python". The python in this tale simultaneously symbolises the exotic, erotic and dangerous entrapment by her male suitor.

Edwards and Monnet argue for the Gothic *monster*, whose sign is further referenced as Del Rey swims with crocodiles in *Blue Jeans*. Here the male power, patriarchy and dominance is represented as *monstrous*. In the video she shares the pool with her beau yet we only see Del Rey swim and writhe with the crocodiles. Analogous of her murderous lover, this adds a powerful otherness to the scene and reinforces the symbols of threatening masculinity and impeding disaster. This expression of *monstrousness* creates a cathartic tension as it "puts the 'pop' in Pop Goth: its popularity is based on the frisson of selling simultaneous aversion from and attraction to self-destruction and cultural taboo" (Edwards and Monnet 9). In a further representation of anxieties Del Rey conforms to the sexual object persona in large part through her retro *pin-up* iconography —meticulous attention to costume, continuous posing and pouting— and song lyrics (Buszek). As in *National Anthem* her lyrics talk of devotion and male strength to protect and to "keep me safe in his bell

tower". Her videos, whilst they may show some of her strength, ultimately reside in patriarchal resolution (Mulvey). She is generally confounded by the male figures in her videos appearing to be very much alone and away from them: most notably in *Blue Jeans*, *Born to Die* and *Video Games*. In two cases it is suggested she is murdered by the male figures of her love.

Her costume and appearance —iconic 1960's swimsuits, pantsuits and big hairstyles in *National Anthem*— portray something of the retro pin-up. Buszek argues that at one time "young feminists may poke fun at the pin-up, but they do so in ways that betray affinities with, even affection for, the genre itself" (3). Del Rey simultaneously adheres to and confronts these normative gender roles, as is characteristic of the Gothic mode (Botting, *Gothic*). These very Gothic contradictions are also evident in Del Rey's often ironic or mocking song delivery, undermining apparent heteronormative sexual and gender positioning. In *National Anthem* she sings, as if parodying women who might sincerely ask, "do you think he'll buy me lots of diamonds?". Her conformity is however, subverted. In Del Rey's videos, clear evidence exists in her facial expressions where she consistently portrays Gothic elements of uncertainty, sorrow, grief and a pervading sense that she does not belong in this world (Botting, *Gothic*). Whilst depicted as a brooding and mourning widow —simultaneously playing the mistress luxuriating on a lion skin rug— in *National Anthem* Del Rey sings, "money is the anthem of success" without a smile or sense of any attachment to the lyrics. In the same song she sings "God you're so handsome" without a trace of glee, pleasure or optimism. In the video for *Blue Jeans* she sings, "I will love you til the end of time" staring sorrowfully into the distance or directly at the camera. This confident yet 'dead stare' emphasises the overall juxtaposition of the largely positive lyrical expression, with the sorrowful facial expression and low sung notes. Del Rey signifies repeatedly that something is amiss; that the American dream is over and that even with apparent success within this sphere, there exists only emptiness and isolation (Botting, *Love Your Zombie*).

Further contradictions exist as Lana Del Rey walks this blurred line —as is the Gothic mode— between heteronormative and ambiguous gender roles (Botting, *Gothic*; Edwards and Monnet). Lana Del Rey oscillates between positions of strength and independence —shown in her deadpan to-camera delivery— to that of weakness and subjugation. As she plays narrator, Del Rey symbolically reclaims some power as she retells the tragic story of *Born to Die* from her throne. Represented here Del Rey's persona exerts a troubled malevolence, with two tigers calmly sat by her side: her benevolent pets, or symbols of contrived excess. She simultaneously presents the angelic —resplendent in sheer white dress and garland 'crown' headdress of the spurned bride in the story— and the stoic as she stares down the camera. Del Rey is powerful and in many senses threatening. At one point she draws a manicured thumbnail across her neck in a cut-throat gesture; a movement echoed later by her lover. Her character ultimately walks symbolically —and latently— to her death. She neither remedies her position as subservient, subordinate female nor revisits any kind of redemption for the excessive male dominance in her videos. The "excess is countered by greater excess" (Botting *Love Your Zombie* 27) and leads to *otherness*.

In this reading of Del Rey's work, there are representations that remain explicitly Pop Gothic, eliciting sensations of paranoia and fear, overloading her videos with these signs (Yeo). These signs elicit the *otherness* of the Gothic mode; expressed in visual symbols of violence, passion or obsession (Botting, *Gothic*). In our digital visual age, subjecting an eager viewer to this excess of signs creates the conditions for over-reading of a growing gender or consumerist paranoia, enabled

by the Gothic, "paranoia stems from an excessive over-reading of signs and is a product of interpretation, misinterpretation and re-interpretation based on one's knowledge or lack of it" (Yeo 22).

Del Rey stimulates these sensations of paranoia partly through interlaying intertextual references. She does this thematically —Gothic melancholy— and pop culturally channelling Marilyn Monroe and other fashion iconography, as well as through explicit textual references, as in her most recent single *Ultraviolence*. In *Ultraviolence*, Del Rey sings "He hit me and it felt like a kiss". Effortlessly and simultaneously she celebrates and lays bare her pain; however the intertextual reference to the violent controversy of the film *A Clockwork Orange* serves to aestheticise the domestic violence she describes. With Del Rey it may be that as meaning is sought amongst the texts as Macfarlane wrote about Lady Gaga, Del Rey's "truth is ultimately irrelevant in the face of its interlayered performance" (130).

Del Rey's Gothic mode of ambiguity, of transgressed boundaries and unclear lines, shows "this ambience of perpetually deferred climax is no stranger to contemporary culture" (Hoffie 15) and may go some way to expressing something of the "lived experience of her audience" (Vigier 1). Hermes argues that in post-feminist pop culture, strong independent post-feminist women can be characterised by their ability to break traditional taboos, question or hold up for interrogation norms and traditions, but that ultimately narrative arches tend to restore the patriarchal norm.

Edwards and Monnet assert that the Gothic in Pop Gothic cultural representation can become "post-race, post-sexuality, post-gender" (6). In places Del Rey exhibits this postmodernism but through the use of Gothic mode goes outside political debates and blurs clear lines of feminist discourse (Botting, *Love Your Zombie*). Whilst a duality in the texts exists; comments on consumerism, the emptiness of capitalist society and a suicidal expression of hopelessness, are undermined as she demonstrates conformity to subservient gender roles and her ambiguously ironic need to be "young and beautiful". To be consumed by her man thus defines her value as an object within a consumerist neo-liberal trope (Jameson). This analysis goes some way to confirming Hermes' assertion that in this post-feminist climate there has been a "loss of a political agenda, or the foundation for a new one, where it signposts the overcoming of unproductive old distinctions between feminist and feminine" (79).

Hermes further argues, with reference to television shows *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, that presentation of female characters or personas has moved forward; the man is no longer the lone guarantor of a woman's happiness. Yet many of the tropes in Del Rey's work are familiar; overwhelming love for her companion equal only to the emphasis on physical appearance. Del Rey breaks taboos —she is powerful, sexual and a romantic predator, without being a demon seductress — and satirises consumerist excess and gender inequality; yet she remains sexually and politically subservient to the whim and sometimes violently expressed or implied male gaze (Mulvey). Del Rey may well represent something of Vigier's assertion that whilst society has clear direction for the 'success' of women, "that real liberation and genuine satisfaction elude them" (1).

In closing, there is no clear answer as to whether Del Rey is a Beauty Queen or Gothic Princess; she is neither and she is both. In Vigier's words, "self-exploitation or self-destruction cannot be the only choices open to young women today" (13). Del Rey's work is provocative on multiple levels. It

hints at the pull of rampant consumerism and the immediacy of narcissistic desires, interlinked with contradictions which indicate the potential for social crises. This is shown in Del Rey's use of the Gothic — otherness, the monstrous, darkness and death— and its juxtaposition with heteronormative gender representations which highlights the persistent commodification of the female body, its subjugation to male power and the potential for deep anxieties in 21st-century identity.

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

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