

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

Arild Fetveit

NECSUS 4 (2): 187–207

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.FETV

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 Delpout'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 yearning 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 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 retotyping 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.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to The Danish Council for Independent Research for supporting the research project on Precarious Aesthetics. I also want to thank Kim Knowles and an anonymous reviewer, as well as Kiersten Leigh Johnson, for their valuable comments and suggestions.

References

- Adorno, T.W. 'The Curves of the Needle', translated by T.Y. Levin, *October*, Vol. 55, Winter 1990.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1933a: www.loebclassics.com (accessed on 30 October 2015).
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1933b: www.loebclassics.com (accessed on 30 October 2015).
- <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/lanadelrey/summertimesadness.html> (accessed on 1 January 2015).
- Bazin, A. 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Summer 1960.
- Bauman, Z. *Liquid life*. Oxford-Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Berlant, L. *Cruel optimism*. Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Boehm, G. 'Indeterminacy: On the Logic of the Image' in *Dynamics and performativity of imagination: The image between the visible and the invisible*, edited by B. Huppau and C. Wulf. London-New York: Routledge, 2009: 219-229.
- Bourriaud, N. 'Precarious Constructions: Answer to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics', *Open/No. 17/A Precarious Existence*, 2009: 20-37.
- Bruno, G. *Surface: Matters of aesthetics, materiality, and media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Burke, E. *A philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*: <http://www.bartleby.com/24/2/> (accessed on 1 November 2015).
- Butler, J. *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London-New York: Verso, 2004.
- Casetti, F. and Somaini, A. 'The conflict between high definition and low definition in contemporary cinema', *Convergence*, 23 August 2013.
- Crary, J. *Suspensions of perception: Attention, spectacle, and modern culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
- Davis, F. *Yearning for yesterday: A sociology of nostalgia*. New York: The Free Press, 1979.
- Eco, U. 'Casablanca, or, The Clichés are Having a Ball' in *Signs*, edited by M. Blonsky. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Fetveit, A. 'Medium-Specific Noise' in *Thinking media aesthetics: Media studies, film studies and the arts*, edited by L. Hausken. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013: 189-215.
- Foster, H. 'On the Art of the Decade', *Artforum*, December 2009.
- Habib, A. *L'attrait de la ruine*. Crisnée: Yellow now, 2011.
- Hanich, J. and Wulff, H.J. (eds). *Auslassen, Andeuten, Auffüllen. Der Film und die Imagination des Zuschauers*. Paderborn: Fink, 2012.
- Huyssen, A. *Twilight memories: Marking time in a culture of amnesia*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Lincoln, K. 'Meet Lana Del Rey, The Corporate-Engineered "Gangster Nancy Sinatra" Who Has The Music Community Up In Arms', *Business Insider*, 18 October 2011: <http://www.businessinsider.com/lana-del-rey-2011-10?IR=T> (accessed on 25 October 2015).

- <http://www.marilynmonroe.ca/camera/about/facts/voice.html> (accessed on 20 July 2015).
- Marks, L.U. 'Loving a Disappearing Image', *Cinémas: revue d'études cinématographiques / Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 8, n° 1-2, 1997: 93-111.
- Marks, L.U. *The skin of the film*. Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Middleton, R. 'Popular Music Analysis and Musicology: Bridging the Gap', *Popular Music*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Spring 1993: 177-190.
- Nichols, B. *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Oxford English Dictionary*: <http://www.oed.com> (accessed on 20 July 2015).
- Pickering, M. and Keightly, E. 'Retrotyping and the Marketing of Nostalgia' in *Media and nostalgia: Yearning for the past, present and future*, edited by K. Niemeyer. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Prior, J. *Life of the right honourable Edmund Burke*, fifth edition. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854.
- Schrey, D. 'Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation' in *Media and nostalgia: Yearning for the past, present and future*, edited by K. Niemeyer. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014: 27-38.
- Siddiqi, A.A. 'Ms. America', *The New Inquiry*, Special Issue on Lana Del Rey, 2014: 2-5.
- Sobchack, V. *Carnal thoughts: Embodiment and moving image culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Steyerl, H. 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux*, Journal #10, 2009: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/> (accessed on 30 October 2015).
- Swash, R. 'One to watch: Lana Del Rey', *Guardian*, 4 September 2011: <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/sep/04/one-to-watch-lana-del-rey> (accessed on 25 October 2015).
- Turner, L. 'Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction', 12 January 2015: <http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/01/12/metamodernism-a-brief-introduction/> (accessed on 25 July 2015).
- Tester, K (ed.). *The flâneur*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Van den Berg, K. 'Last Exit Underclass Lana Del Rey and the Politics of White Trash. Notes on Metamodernism', 1 May 2013: <http://www.metamodernism.com/2013/05/01/last-exit-underclass> (accessed 1 November 2015).
- Walser, R. 'Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 2, Summer 1993: 343.
- Wikipedia, a cliché (accessed 1 November 2015).

About the author

Arild Fetveit is Associate Professor in the Department for Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen. He has published in the field of reception studies, convergence, medium-specific noise, music video, and digitalisation of film and photography as well as written a dissertation on the discursive possibilities between documentary and fiction film. He is currently directing an international research project on precarious aesthetics.

Notes

1. Schrey 2014, p. 27.
2. Fetveit 2013.
3. Marks 1997, 2000.
4. Habib 2011.
5. Casetti & Somaini 2013.
6. Steyerl 2009.
7. Schrey 2014. Beyond the present surge of interest in such imagery, productive perspectives on historical materials have been offered in Boehm 2009, Crary 1999, and Bruno 2014.
8. Fetveit 2013.
9. Foster 2009.
10. Ibid.
11. Butler 2004.
12. Berlant 2011, p. 192.
13. Ibid., p. 193.
14. Ibid., p. 195.
15. Such sports are marketed by a ubiquity of GoPro cameras inscribing the dangers involved though aggressive forms of precarious mediation.
16. Bourriaud 2009, p. 23.
17. Bauman 2005.
18. Ibid., p. 2.
19. Bourriaud 2009, p. 23.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 33.
22. See Habib 2011.
23. <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/lanadelrey/summertimesadness.html>
24. Sobchack 2004, p. 243.
25. Nichols 1991, p. 79.
26. Del Rey's theatrical expressivity lends itself to evoking different personas. This is especially so in her early songs about intense living in younger days reflected on by a more mature persona, which bring out a clear contrast between two personas. This contrast has given way to a more unison Del Rey-persona in the album *Honeymoon* (2015), to some extent also in *Ultraviolence* (2014), as she has largely moved away from thematising the Renegade Teen of her earlier work.
27. <http://www.marilynmonroe.ca/camera/about/facts/voice.html> (accessed on 20 July 2015).
28. Middleton 1993, p. 186.
29. Charles Baudelaire quoted in Tester 2013, p. 16.
30. *OED* Online (accessed on 20 July 2015).
31. Burke. Part III. Section I. Of Beauty.
32. Prior 1854, p. 47.
33. Burke. Section IX. Perfection Not The Cause Of Beauty.
34. Burke. Section XVI. On Delicacy.
35. Lincoln 2011.
36. Swash 2011.
37. Bazin 1960, p. 4.

38. Adorno 1990, p. 48.
39. Walser 1993, p. 343.
40. See Aristotle 1933a, p. 267, and 1933b, p. 93.
41. For a recent investigation into ways in which films may work on the *imaginatio* see Hanich & Wulff 2012.
42. This lineage, involving Elvis, The King of Rock, as her father, is consistent with her Spanish last name. Her full name may translate to 'The King's Lana'.
43. Eco 1985, p. 38.
44. Wikipedia, a cliché.
45. Huysen 1995, p. 28.
46. Davis 1979, p. 14.
47. Pickering & Keightly 2014, p. 88.
48. Van den Berg 2013.
49. Ibid.
50. Siddiqi 2014.
51. Ibid.
52. Turner 2015.

