

(Re)imagining the American Dream and Hollywood Glamour: Decoding Lana Del Rey's Videographies

Sunyat Swezin

Abstract

In this paper, the visual narratives of Lana Del Rey's "National Anthem" and "Candy Necklace" are selected to illuminate how she represents the interplay between the themes of self-exploration, female desire, identity struggle, and sociocultural norms within the context of chasing love, fame, and power. The incorporation of haptic visuality and the deliberate use of old-styled cinematography in her videos allow the audience to engage with the viewing experience sentimentally. Her engagement with tragic and glamorous female figures allows her to explore the vulnerability behind the Hollywood facade and American society, questioning the cost of conforming to societal ideals.

Keywords: *American Dream, Hollywood Glamour, Lana Del Rey*

Introduction

The rise of capitalism and consumer culture helped propel the United States to the forefront of global power due to its postwar prosperity around the 1960s, and along with this event, Hollywood played a pivotal role in advertising and promoting ideologies of hard work and self-reliance. However, the harsh realities like civil rights movements, the second wave of feminism, and the Vietnam War occurring during that period are negated by Hollywood escapism, which idealized the standard American lifestyle accompanied by haute culture, glamorous fashion, freedom, and happiness. Often interpreting the American Dream as an escape and as a quest, Lana Del Rey is deeply preoccupied with the concept of America in a nostalgic manner, depicting the symbolized material objects, locales, and famous figures that are thought of as belonging to historical and classical Hollywood or the aristocratic class. In fact, some of her frequently repeated references, like Pepsi, diamonds, limousines, cigarettes, LA, New York City, Rockefeller, Marilyn Monroe, and Priscilla Presley, serve as evidentiary support for her endeavor to construct an artistic persona that is tied to old Americana yet partially distorted due to the contemporary themes in her videos. In addition, she excessively romanticizes the female experience to the extent

where agony and sadness are nearly presented as desirable qualities. Her endeavors to reconstruct the American Dream, which is stereotypically perceived in utopian terms, are reflected in her lament for the loss of the nostalgic visuals, introspective narratives, and the aesthetics of old Hollywood. Consequently, her reconceptualization of the American Dream delving into its underbellies: despair, hollowness, and the ethereal and deceitful nature of happiness, appears as an admonition, particularly for women. On the other hand, she still maintains the idea of American dreaming and glamorous Hollywood life, as she claims that she is “just a small-town girl dreaming Hollywood dreams” in her song “Sweetheart,” and she usually presents these conflicting dual mindsets with a double in her music videos like “Ride” and “National Anthem.” As Catherine Vigier mentions, “the paradoxical features of Del Rey’s works manifest in the restless pursuit of achievement, an integral facet of the American Dream, avowing a steadfast allegiance to bygone American ideals, and underscoring that it remains inevitable to encounter disillusionment” (Vigier, 2015, 8). As a next point, by personifying the idea of the American dream and the old Americana as an unrequited or lost lover, which embodies the entity of unattainability, she evokes the sentiments of despair, yearning, and angst while attempting to disrupt the typical utopian sense of the American dream through the representation of disoriented aspects of fears and obsession. One prominent instance of *prosopopeia* occurs when she portrays living the glamorous American lifestyle featuring the persona of John F. Kennedy as a symbol in her “National Anthem,” reinforcing the lyrics “I am your national anthem...,” and she simultaneously employs subjective interpretation to ascribe narratives and identities to landscapes, American experience, and the United States itself.

However, since the release of the “Lust for Life” album in 2017, significantly, Del Rey’s musical performances do not feature conspicuous displays of the American flag anymore; meanwhile, her songs, particularly in the haunting “When the World Was at War, We Kept Dancing,” offer a contemplative musing on the present perilous global milieu, questioning: “Is it the end of an era? Is it the end of America?” The worries and hope she holds about today’s chaotic political situation are clear in her lyrical compositions, like in the above lines, wherein the notions of ignorance and innocence are also strongly stressed in a satirical manner.

According to David Travers Garland, luck plays a crucial factor in achieving the Hollywood American Dream (Garland 1990, 8), which promotes hope, daydreaming, and offers the justification for failure, adding a nuanced layer to the success ideology. Del Rey commonly engages with the notion of chance or luck, the most prominent aspect in Hollywood, in her songs. One such example is the “Lucky Ones,” in which a couple is leaving town to find a better possibility, or “Lust for Life,” in which she sings “We are the masters of our own fates” and includes the

skyline scenes of the famous Hollywood sign. She tends to keep a distance from mainstream America and its current society and strives to habituate the in-between states, which are represented in her visuals by utilizing dash-cam perspectives, double exposures, and making connections with various historical figures as a mainstream artist. Most obviously, her obsession with “the open road” additionally uncovers the drive to self-exploration, transgression, non-conformity, and chasing infinite and elusive possibilities. She also criticizes and romanticizes traditional glamorous Americana and the façade of the American Dream ethos, encapsulating the ideal values of Hollywood seduction, such as fame, fortune, and beauty, through indulgence and a nihilistic approach. Henceforth, the present inquiry attempts to analyse Del Rey’s music videos of “National Anthem” and “Candy Necklace” while examining how she underlines the fantasy of the American Dream associated with Hollywood glamour from the viewpoint of female experience and the realities of the present-day geopolitical landscape as well.

The Myth of the American Dream

The roots of the cultural lexicon “American Dream” were congruously buttressed by the historical backdrop of European immigration and westward territorial expansion in America, culminating in the attainment of land. Though this original idea of the American Dream is less complicated and encompasses the achievement of wealth, happiness, and equal opportunities for everyone, the limitations still apply to marginalized groups. However, due to postwar economic propagation and accelerated mass consumerism during the 20th century, the notion of the American Dream becomes distorted, relying heavily on the idea of individualism, which is characterized by self-independence and upward social mobility. In *The Epic of America*, which elucidates the historical trajectory of the American Dream since the early arrival of the English in America, John Truslow Adams expresses that the American Dream envisages an utopian social order and pertains to a land where humanity transcends its present state, embracing abundance, fulfilment, equality, and individual potential (Adams 1931, 404). Adams additionally explains that the ordinary men and the leaders led the process of migration to seek greater liberation and joy not only for themselves but also for their generations (Adams 1931, 31). However, the narrative and conception of migration in his book fail to take into account the various functions and pursuits of women throughout migration, and he emphasizes the equality and potential for the development of only men without any recognition of women (Lotun 2021, 4).

In contemporary times, the interpretation of the American Dream has been subject to rigorous interrogation in light of the predicament of income inequality,

societal precariousness, and the multifarious challenges precipitated by the economic downturn and the global phenomena that foster a milieu of unpredictability and anxiety. In respect to this, Madeline High argues that the current concept of the American Dream heavily focuses on monetary achievement, and this myopic view ignores the obstacles caused by wealth disparity and other variables beyond pure perseverance (High 2015, 5). In *Bootstrapped* (2023), Alissa Quart also effectively dispels the widely held fallacy of self-sufficiency and individualism in the American Dream. She argues that this fallacy not only engenders a culture of imprudent materialism and inescapable despondency, but also perpetuates the scourge of social inequality and curtails the prospect of optimal collective decision-making (Quart 2023, 268). This notion effectively highlights the precarious consumerist culture, and the belief that “one can pull oneself up by one’s own bootstraps” ignores the systemic barriers and inequalities that exist in society, hindering the ability of individuals to achieve true self-sufficiency and refusing to recognize the importance of solidarity. Likewise, Zillah Eisenstein expounds on how consumer culture coalesces with a conception of individualism to beguile both the privileged and underprivileged, neglecting poverty and unemployment (qtd. in Hooks 2020, 72).

Additionally, Bell Hooks claims that through the hedonistic lifestyle of the rich, television and other media proffer depictions of the American Dream, wherein everyone is endowed with the potential to attain wealth and success, while simultaneously intimating that possession of a specific commodity functions as an intermediary of class distinctions (Hooks 2020, 71). Consequently, this rags-to-riches illusion tends to disregard the realities of class divisions and hierarchies in society, which create structural inequalities and injustices that are often insurmountable. According to Quart, individuals who are purportedly self-made are not limited to males but also encompass the most socioeconomically privileged females (Quart 2023, 85). By evaluating the concept of girlboss, which reinforces existing power structures and fails to recognize that success is often determined by factors such as wealth, race, and access, she asserted that such a feminist ideal is often fiction and marginalizes others (Quart 2023, 87). If success is largely a matter of privilege rather than individual merit, then what does it mean to strive for success?

As Hollywood films exert an influential impact on the socio-cultural milieu, Hooks expounds on the thematic predilections of Hollywood cinema, particularly the portrayal of race, gender, and socio-economic sectors. She also highlights that the American Dream embodies an almost dogmatic faith in the efficacy of competitive pursuits to engender triumph and perpetual engagement in the cutthroat competition that constitutes the very essence of the game within a hegemonic cultural paradigm (Hooks 2012, 102–103). The Hollywood industry

perpetuates a culture of domination in which individuals are constantly pitted against one another in the pursuit of success. This culture is underpinned by chasing the American Dream, which prioritizes the pursuit of power and monetary gains above the promotion of communal wellness and egalitarianism.

The Hollywood Glamour

The American Dream undergoes a transformation entwined with the 20th-century consumerist ethos as the burgeoning influence of Hollywood in the early 1900s shapes and filters its essence through a distinctive allure. During the cinematic period of the 1930s, Hollywood garnered epithets such as the “Dream Factory,” which proffers consumerist cultural artefacts imbued with glamour not only to engender transcendental escapism but also to instigate the desire for a materially enriched image or lifestyle (Gundle and Castelli 2006, 62). In *The Glamour System*, Stephen Gundle elucidates the historical foundations of glamour as an “enticing structure” (Gundle 2006, 16). The Hollywood industry, colloquially referred to as the glamour hub, effectuated a profound metamorphosis of mundane individuals into painstakingly designed visual symbols, representing an alluring enigma of personal desires and fantasies. These captivating representations were subsequently idolized by the general populace through the acquisition of commodified merchandise (Gundle 2006, 68). In doing so, the Hollywood film stars who captivate the popular imagination have become inextricably entwined with the culture of consumption, and their very essence, with all of its attendant extravagance, represents a manifestation of the American Dream that is deeply steeped in the allure of glamour.

The notion of the “glamour phenomenon” transpired in the early 1900s as a catalyst for metamorphosis into an upgraded self and was subsequently hijacked by Hollywood. Before the 1930s, the term “glamour” was used by fan magazines to describe a wide range of subjects associated with the allure of distant and different lives that existed outside of the norms (Keating 2012, 106). During the “silent era” of Hollywood, the actresses in their glamorous fashions and looks in the films were just to be visually appreciated, being kept at some distance from the audience, while they were expected to accordingly assume submissive roles; this fact rendered the paradoxical nature of the idea of glamour through its otherworldliness and familiarity visible.

In *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism*, Carol Dyhouse posits the compelling argument that the concept of glamour is intricately connected to the phenomenon of modernity and the emergence of technologies, most notably the influential medium of Hollywood cinema (Dyhouse 2010, 5). The proliferation of cinema

during the inception of the 20th century facilitated the extensive diffusion of glamorous imagery, which had the effect of captivating the collective imagination of the masses. According to Dyhouse, the concept of glamour is fluid despite its evolutionary nature; nevertheless, its tenacity as an exquisite and erotic appeal distinguished by theatricality and artificiality emerged during the 1920s, peaked in classic Hollywood, declined in the '60s with second-wave feminism, and resurged in the '80s (Williams 2013, 44). Dyhouse claims that glamour has commonly been construed as transgressive, signifying women's rebellion against rather than adherence to cultural norms throughout the twentieth century, and simultaneously, glamour can be a precarious domain as it reduces women to mere objects (Dyhouse 2010, 203–211). Additionally, the notion of glamour associated with femininity has been a manipulative tool in the commodification of the female body, and its infamous reputation has been further exacerbated during the waves of feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, owing to the resultant discourse surrounding gender and power imbalances. The notion of glamour, therefore, crucially serves as a versatile lens that refracts the nuances of mass-mediated sociocultural expressions, Hollywood's cinematic representations, power, and gender dynamics while simultaneously illustrating the tension between the opulent aesthetics of glamour and its socio-cultural implications.

“The National Anthem”: *From Patriotism to Pop Culture*

Del Rey's music video titled “National Anthem (2012)” constitutes an illustration of cultural critique, whereby her utilization of the enigmatic national narrative and historical motifs yields a reconstruction of the stereotypical features of the American dream. In “National Anthem,” Del Rey assumes the roles of the glamorous Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy, coupled with the representation of the iconic President John F. Kennedy by A\$AP Rocky, thereby evoking an allusion to the Camelot era of American politics and romance. The promised and idealized society of the past era is unveiled through this allusion, yet this elusive façade suddenly vanishes in the end as the couple encounters a tragic fate, ultimately embodying the collapse of Americans' utopian dreams. The video crystallizes the cultural imaginary of the American dream, epitomized by the repeated lyrics, “Money is the anthem of success.” Del Rey's satirical conceptualization of success is inextricably linked with the glorification of material wealth and the exertion of power over subordinates, and this perceptual resonance is also recurrent in her other songs like “Money, Power, Glory.”

Furthermore, the signifiers in her visual narrative, such as vignettes, irregular frames, soft and warm lighting, a dreamlike atmosphere, and haptic imagery,

illustrate the nuanced dynamics between the trauma and healing process. According to Laura U. Marks, haptic visuality obfuscates inter-subjective demarcations and is akin to the relationship between a baby and its mother, where the baby forms its identity through a dynamic interplay of unity and separation (Marks 2002, 1-22). She also explores how film's material properties evoke cultural displacement trauma, emphasizing sensory communication and facilitating healing (Marks 2002, 1-22). In "National Anthem," the portrayal of the golden era of America associated with sensory-provoking images, such as hands in close-up shots, the rays of sunlight, the hand-held camera effect, and the swirl of champagne in the glasses, conveys a sense of pleasure and nostalgia. Simultaneously, the employment of haptic visuality allows the audience to intimately experience Del Rey's emotional narrative, establishing the video as a tool of hope and healing.

Kennedy, the 35th President of America, was an emblem of the American Dream and the embodiment of hope for American people at the dawn of consumerism because of his unwavering advocacy of human rights, skillful management of the Cuban Missile Crisis, space exploration, and his devotion to emancipating the historically oppressed. Del Rey's "National Anthem" underlines these values of liberty and aspirations, with the African American family demonstrating the triumph of the American dream. Released in 2012, under President Barack Obama's leadership, the video offers an unique perspective on the evolving socio-political landscape. Kathryn Hume, in her *American Dream, American Night-mare* (2000), expresses that the 1960s heralded a paradigm shift in American history, characterized by a pervasive disquietude with the American way of life, and that this unstable situation primarily emanated from a liberal moral ambivalence, catalyzed by the distrust of governmental, racial, and personal ethics in the preceding decades (Macarthur 2004, 15). The assassination of Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 served as a turning point for Americans, inciting a sense of disillusionment and scepticism regarding the viability of the American dream (Macarthur 2004, 15). John F. Kennedy and Monroe embodied Hollywood glamour, projecting mystic personas onto the television screen as symbols of American power and beauty, respectively, but their demises revealed the darker side of Hollywood's scandals and tragedies.

In Lana Del Rey's "National Anthem," her use of a non-linear narrative structure and a shift from monochrome to color obfuscate the boundaries between the temporal dichotomy of past and present, between objective reality and subjective fantasy, as well as between individual and collective identity. In doing so, her artistic manifestation adumbrates the fluidity of the American Dream, which is incessantly influenced and shaped by socio-cultural and historical factors. Moreover, she is presented as an embodiment of domesticity and maternal essence, mirroring the notion of the nuclear family, which serves as the paragon of the American dream.

The carefully chosen spaces, which include both homey interiors like the kitchen and dreamy outdoor scenes with the mansion and rose gardens as backdrops, feeding the husband at the home party (2:57–3:00), and the familial bliss encapsulated in moments of playfulness (2:19–2:27, 3:40–3:53), denote a sense of affection, a happy marriage, and her role as a domestic caretaker or an ideal motherhood. Del Rey's character appears as a homely, nurturing matron, which conveys an unmistakable message of wholesome family values; however, she manifests a distinctive brand of personal autonomy imbued with an intricate comprehension of female agency and empowerment, in contrast to the conventional expectations of women during the halcyon era. Her control over the narrative and individuality are prominently reflected in the myriad close-up vignettes, which capture her introspective emotional states and align with her intentional establishment of eye contact with the audience. She also navigates the aspects of glamorous femininity and power through her featuring personas of iconic American cultural symbols like Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, in line with how Gundle claims that glamour functions as a mechanism of empowerment (Gundle 2008, 4). The imagery Del Rey uses, replete with diamond jewellery, rose gardens, haute couture, a half-up beehive look, and classic automobiles and yachts, in addition to the hedonistic acts of smoking and drinking, all imbued with a warm chromatic tone, showcases the classic atmosphere of Hollywood glamour, which subsequently perpetuates the mystique of feminine power.

Similarly to the pioneering oeuvre of photographer Slim Aaron, Del Rey's lifestyle in the video captures the glitterati and high society of the 50s and 60s in all their glamour and refinement. In particular, Aaron's "The Beauty and Beast (1959)" serves as a reminiscence in which Del Rey is captured in a highly evocative pose atop a lion skin rug, eliciting a visceral response from the observer, and she exposes the alluring lifestyle of the privileged few while highlighting the inherent dangers of power and fame (see Figures 1 and 2). On the one hand, her glamorous appearance in a diamond necklace is portrayed as an object of desire shackled by patriarchal projections, juxtaposing the glitz and grandeur of the fur rug.



Figure 1: Del Rey posing on a lion skin rug in “National Anthem”



Figure 2: Slim Aaron’s “The Beauty and the Beast (1959)”

Paul A. Crutcher claims that Del Rey depicts the American Dream as nothing short of grotesque, and this grotesque phenomenon permeates and pervades the current social fabric, inhabiting a world that is strikingly similar to a frightful nightmare (Crutcher 2013, 238). Del Rey, in glamorous garments and a diamond necklace, is in stark contrast with the macabre appearance of the rug, revealing the grotesqueness and imperfections beneath the polished veneer of prosperity. In this sense, the rug serves not only as a glamorous piece of decoration but also as a powerful symbol of the paradoxes and contradictions that define the American experience. Furthermore, the cigarette and cigar become potent symbols of Del Rey's "National Anthem (2012)," signifying an unrelenting pursuit of pleasure and a disregard for the constraints of societal norms. Brown observes that the simple act of inhaling and exhaling the smoke creates a sense of style, transgression, and danger (Brown 2018, 2), and it marks the obsession with death or destruction (Brown 2018, 4). In the scene where the singer indulges in the act of smoking a cigarette and exhales amidst the dining setting, a deliberate departure from societal norms serves as a tangible reaffirmation of her commitment to the unhindered pursuit of personal desires, all within the framework of metaphorical disillusionment. This visual depiction (see Figure 3) can also be perceived as contentious, as it reinforces the idea that to chase the American Dream is a call of the void, characterized by an erosive and detrimental mindset, and embodies a state of equivocal allure towards what is antithetical to satisfaction. Taking that into account, Del Rey not only portrays a glamorous and idealized ethos of the American Dream but also hints at its dangerous underbelly and perpetual desire, allegorically presenting this dream as a process of self-annihilation, which is also tainted with masochistic tendencies.



Figure 3: Smoking scene of Del Rey in “National Anthem”

The profound collaboration between idealized representation and real historical phenomena catalyzes complexities and problematics since viewers navigate the chasm between the two realms and are confronted with the dissonance regarding the American identity. The introductory monochrome of the video, in which Del Rey features a contemporary rendition of Monroe crooning “Happy Birthday” to the president (0:01–1:17), is rapidly transformed into the subsequent scenes that depict a bleak and apocalyptic view of the United States. In addition, the imageries of Kennedy’s assassination, alongside the chaotic diegetic sounds and the shaky camera effects, convey numerous controversies and conspiracies, political fraud, and moral disintegration. Del Rey presents a transformative journey from an initial state of guileless idealism and hope to a state of disheartenment and despair, which she deftly explores through her nuanced treatment of the American Dream’s themes, showcasing the inconsistencies of the respective concept and the delusive facades of beauty, power, and societal prestige.

Furthermore, she confronts the shadowed facets of love and relationships, meditating on their fragility to anxiety, insecurity, and temporal and situational influences in the current uncertain world. The whole thematic underpinning of the music video revolves around the pursuit of an idealized existence, wherein love and relationships serve as requisite sacrifices; it also romanticizes the timeless reality of a persistent quest for love and happiness, situated within the contemporary

world characterized by the dual hues of aspirational dreams and mirages. This idea is manifested in Del Rey's purposeful choice of damaged retro cinematography, characterized by its scratches, grains, and instability, and in her visual narrative, wherein she strives to reach out and rescue her partner from her convertible, ultimately culminating in relinquishment. In these concluding scenes, utilizing slow-motion effects with her poetic monologue as a background adds a subtle layer to the overall thematic discourse of her video.

What is the Behind-the-camera Footage of Candy Necklace?

Del Rey's "Candy Necklace," characterized by the aesthetic nuances of monochromatic hues and the nostalgia of old Hollywood cinematography, was released in April 2023 and won the award for "Best Alternative Video." In "Candy Necklace," Del Rey explores the psychological dimensions of claustrophobia and the challenges of societal expectations behind the female persona and celebrityhood through various motifs. Contrary to "National Anthem," which adopts a predominantly rose-colored portrayal of American lifestyle and foregrounds a glamorous and idyllic atmosphere through warm light flares, the monochrome footage of "Candy Necklace" conveys an inclination towards introspection and a subdued exploration of the shadowy realm of the American ethos. The dichotomy in visual aesthetics across the two videos associated with color transitions serves as a deliberate device, illustrating the disparate narrative tones, and both narratives delve into Old Hollywood vignettes concerning American identity. In "Candy Necklace," the visual medium features the portrayal of doppelgängers of Hollywood figures in a manner akin to the characteristic behind-the-scenes footage of a film noir production. The video "Candy Necklace" is a *mise en abyme*, where the artist—Del Rey herself—embodies an actress, busily attending to the myriad minutiae that go into the making of an old-style film.

The video is composed of the multifarious fragments of film shooting in which Del Rey is found with Jon Batiste, a mysterious older man, a film crew, and high-end, luxurious accoutrements such as necklaces, enormous paintings, a classy automobile, and a fabulous mansion with a grand staircase and piano, and this atmosphere serves to heighten the sense of sophistication and glamour. In the video, Del Rey ingeniously takes on the guise of Priscilla Presley, Elizabeth Short (Black Dahlia), Marilyn Monroe, and Veronica Lake, flitting from one persona to another, alluding to the legacies of these iconic women, who represent the lamentable realities of tragic stardom and fame in Hollywood.

Like her prior works, Del Rey is found to have taken on the role of co-star alongside a black man, a casting choice that ostensibly contradicts the historical

norms of the classic film noir industry. The involvement of a black co-star within the context of film noir represents a departure from the established cinematic conventions of the genre, which have been characterized by a dearth of racial diversity, and also challenges the hegemonic power structures of the era. Del Rey's interpretation of classic Hollywood espouses the idea of a post-racial milieu and manifests a distorted perspective on the cultural identity of America during the noir period dominated by white protagonists. According to Paul A. Crutcher's assertion, Del Rey never fails to embrace an idealized construct of a bygone era, characterized by benevolent and pervasive values that have become obsolete or have never been actualized (Crutcher 2013, 245). Del Rey presents an oversimplified and idealized picture of the historical American ideals of freedom, patriotic pride, and the American way of life while ignoring their less appealing counterparts.

In the video, the presence of cameras and the oversized eyes in the painting serves as a symbolic manifestation of the surveillance of the industry and the prevailing celebrity culture, which greatly values the notion of visibility. As Del Rey, coupled with an Afro-American man, gracefully descends the flight of stairs, a skillful interplay of shadows and a focused illumination cast upon them emphasize the disconnection between the image of stardom and the real (see Figure 4). This stairway scene reminds the viewers of the iconic last scene of *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) directed by Billy Wilder, and the video finds its thematic resonance in exploring the flimsy veneer of stardom and experiencing disillusionment and angst regarding the commodification of the fame behind cameras.



Figure 4: Scene of shadows and light in “Candy Necklace”

It is often believed that women should be lavished with material assets, particularly those that are linked to a glamorous lifestyle, and Del Rey's diamond necklace serves as a representation of this stereotype. Marilyn Monroe's classic performance of “Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend” additionally enhances the

diamond's cultural connotation as a symbol of romance, opulence, and femininity. Patriarchal society's standards for women's desires devalue women by treating them as property that can be owned and controlled by luxurious items like diamonds. Moreover, Del Rey portrays a diverse array of women throughout the narrative, each bedecked with a necklace, which can be interpreted as the representation of the public persona of women or her artistic persona, serving as a biting commentary on the figurative "sweetness" that society deems "desirable" in women, which ultimately results in their subjugation. This metaphorical idea is buttressed by her colloquy with the crew at a certain juncture of the video, and she explains, "The whole thing about the video—why it was all supposed to be behind the scenes—was because all these women who changed their names and changed their hair, like me, it's like they all fell into these different snake holes..." (4:08–4:25). Del Rey's thoughts regarding the extensive transformation encountered by the female protagonists, including her own self, serve as a harbinger of a nuanced exploration of identity amidst the Hollywood glamour and its accompanying quagmires, whereby one may run the risk of losing one's sense of selfhood in the course of the artistic quest. Her statement echoes the dichotomous nature between the performative and private personas, alongside the process of introspection and the transcendence of personal constraints. Although Carol Dyhouse acknowledges that investment in one's physical appearance may yield greater returns for women as opposed to their male counterparts, the potential magnitude of loss for women who opt out of conforming to the prescribed standards of glamour is relatively greater than that of men (qtd. in Williams 2013, 47). Del Rey emphasizes this existential battle while shedding light on the complex, multi-dimensional nature of identity, conformity, and gender expectations that inexorably beset women in the realm of Hollywood as they strive to navigate success within highly competitive environments. This idea is also solidified by the scenes in which she takes off her Veronica Lake-style peek-a-boo wig and subsequently shows her middle finger in an aggressive way.

Janey Place contends that film noir often embodies a male-centric fantasy. In a scene reminiscent of this genre (Place 1992, 35), Del Rey's entrance into a mansion, adorned with huge paintings, intensifies the scopophilic male gaze, with the elderly man therein further solidifying the male subjective look (1:19–1:25), which is also repeated with the close-up shot in another scene (5:54–6:02). Employing symbolic implication, Del Rey underscores that the mansion becomes a metaphorical representation of the grandiosity of Hollywood stardom intertwined with the aspirational allure of the American dream and the pitfalls of fame, encapsulating a narrative of delusions. Ken Hillis expresses that "in film noir, a recurrent theme manifests in the advocacy for a reconfiguration of indi-

vidual identity and reveals an ambivalent side of Hollywood narratives” (Hillis 2005, 3–4). The video portrays the shooting scene encapsulated within the aesthetic realms reminiscent of classic film noir, proffering a nuanced homage to the earliest feminist zeitgeist, concurrent with Del Rey’s pursuit of a legacy initiated by her predecessors with a melancholic resonance. According to Shaunanne Tangney, an age of anxiety spanning from the end of the Second World War to the advent of the late 1960s countercultural wave epitomizes the period of the genre of film noir (Tangney 2012, 188). Del Rey’s “Candy Necklace (2023)” upholds a hallmark of the genre through the masterfully created shadows, the eerie atmosphere of the passageway, the controversial imageries, and the seemingly criminal site, all of which are accentuated by black and white hues, underscoring the existential anxiety and bitterness.

As elucidated by J. L. Hochschild, for the accomplished, the American Dream serves as a heuristic for validating their self-efficacy and motivating further endeavors, while it also engenders complex states such as anxiety, guilt, and disillusionment (Hochschild 1995, 38). Indeed, Del Rey’s Monroe-esque persona, accompanied by the lyrical backdrop of “sitting on the sofa, feeling super suicidal,” in conjunction with the self-proclaimed inability to transcend robotic tendencies (2:48–3:01), indicates the intricate relationship between societal expectations and individual contentment. In contrast to the public gaze-centric depiction of Monroe in “National Anthem,” her portrayal of Monroe in “Candy Necklace” delves into the complexities of constriction, victimization, and the labyrinthine journey of self-discovery amid adversity. She also illustrates an entanglement between reality and delusion, along with the idea of the confinement of her performance-oriented existence. She exposes the disintegrated facade of an ambitious paradigm that promises immeasurable achievement and relish but ultimately succumbs to a distressing milieu of desolation and detachment.

Within the narrative of the video, a conspicuous archetypal male persona emerges, epitomized by the enigmatic elderly gentleman who, in some of the frames, can be observed gallantly clasping the arm of Del Rey and beholding her singing while elegantly clutching a cigar in his hand. All of his appearances embody a timeless and archaic form of masculine prowess in the Hollywood industry. Through this portrayal, gendered power dynamics take center stage, shedding light on their pivotal role in Del Rey’s emotional distress and her prevailing angst. Furthermore, Del Rey emerges as an embodiment of the femme fatale archetype, straddling the delicate dichotomy of danger and victimhood, thereby representing the convergence of two antithetical yet intertwined forces: the allure of diamonds, symbolic of glamour and material success, and the imagery of blood, epitomizing both sacrifice and controversial disaster (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Diamonds and blood in “Candy Necklace.”

This scene is followed by the spectacle of a cloak cascading from the automobile and the mysterious blood-stained Pandora’s box, which denotes an unleashed affliction (8:23–8:39). Laura Mulvey highlights the symbolism in “Pandora’s Box,” wherein a nuanced amalgamation of feminine ideations interweaves the dichotomy of femininity’s internal-external polarity (Mulvey 1996, 56). Her perspective delves into the multifaceted nature of femininity as embodied by Pandora’s box, emphasizing how femininity can be seen as both external beauty and hidden dangers. Through this symbolism of “Pandora’s Box,” which unveils the comprehensive picture, Del Rey engages in a form of chiasmus in which the public life in “National Anthem” juxtaposes the internal turmoil in “Candy Necklace.” According to Maree Macmillan (2009, 239), “Pandora’s box” connotes the enthralling and precarious nature of femininity, encapsulating the seductive allure of female sexuality while embodying a paradigm of unbridled chaos and irrationality, serving as the root cause of worldly troubles. In “Candy Necklace,” Del Rey assumes personae of ambivalent femininity, embodying the intricacies of womanhood as a duality to articulate female agency while also igniting its inclination towards havoc. On the other hand, Del Rey unravels fame and success through Pandora’s box, which can also be viewed as a more complicated reality, replete with auspicious aspirations, as asserted by Macmillan (2009, 239), wherein Pandora’s box also engenders an optimistic perspective, serving as a tool for transformative potential. Jim Cullen states that the attainment of success in one’s endeavors necessitates “time, energy, reputation, and a sense of hope” (Cullen 2003, 161). Del Rey perceives the dark side of the American dream through the lens of hedonistic paradigms, entailing a simultaneous fusion of tragic optimism. The dissonance, rooted in her portrayals, showcases her relentless obsession with

the idea of the American dream in spite of her recognition of its elusiveness.

The ending scene, in which Del Rey, bereft of the necklace, achieves the coveted Hollywood star sign bearing her name with exuberance, conveys an obvious shift in her narrative by transforming into color cinematography. Through the shift of color, the melancholic and dramatic footage culminates with a thread of satire, adopting an ironic tone to unrelentingly critique the constructs of fame, power, and identity in Hollywood through the lens of the female perspective. Additionally, regarding “Candy Necklace,” in an Instagram post, Del Rey articulated the following message: “Don’t take the necklace; if you already did, give it back” (Del Rey 2023). In this regard, the juxtaposition emerges, observed within her lyrical composition— “Candy necklace, I am obsessed with this”—and it underscores the absurd dynamics between the themes of indulgence and despair, hope and disillusionment in pursuing her idealised existence.

Conclusion

Del Rey’s approach to the American dream manifests through her embodiment of the Hollywood glamour archetype of the past and her enthrallment with elite aesthetics and the identity of bygone America, all of which are haunting illusions that oppose the multifaceted socio-political realities of contemporary existence. Within her artistic realm, the American dream is perceived as a disoriented state filled with longing and anxiety, presenting a beguiling facade while deconstructing the very essence of this ideal. Her employment of ill-fated figures, historical allegories, boundless idealization, the use of precarious cinematic bodies, and the exaggerated glamour of stardom impart an uncanny impression and operate as both reverential homage and incisive critique, blurring the demarcations between mythology and reality. In other words, delineating a liminal realm suspended not only between the tangible confines of reality and the alluring fantasy but also between personal desire and societal expectations, Del Rey’s conception of the American Dream functions as a form of escapism or “otherness.”

Through the above analysis of “National Anthem” and “Candy Necklace,” I explored how Del Rey captures the predicament of women ensnared within the confines of societal expectations and the oppressive weight of conformity, unveiling the disillusionment and precariousness that invariably accompany the relentless pursuit of a life steeped in idealization. Consequently, her videos call attention to the manifold tribulations faced by women attempting to attain flawlessness or a perfect persona, only to find themselves ensnared within an intricate web of unattainable standards, unfulfilled expectations, and the haunted ideological clashes between the past and present. Ultimately, exposing the absurdity and irony that

underpin traditional gender roles within the very fabric of success ideology and American society, Del Rey confronts the dichotomy between female agency and the constricting influence of normative patriarchal norms, resulting in a reminiscence of an innocent and simpler time rather than a place.

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