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Visual Culture in *Lust for Life* by Lana Del Rey

Lana Del Rey's *Lust for Life* is a 1970's inspired album filled with light and dreamy sounds and visuals. Del Rey uses visual art to enhance the listeners' experience and transport them to the world that she imagined while writing and producing the album. The way that she is dressed, the cameras used to take the pictures, the style choices made for the photoshoot, and even the editing choices all add meaning to the sound and lyrics of the album. The bright and colorful art and aesthetic behind the *Lust for Life* album is what makes the album stand out among Lana Del Rey's dark and mysterious discography, which is one of the reasons why I love the album.

The album cover for *Lust for Life* features Lana Del Rey in a 1970's inspired white bell sleeved dress. Her hair is long and wavy with daisies miscellaneously placed throughout. I began thinking back to the symbolism used in Lady Gaga's inauguration dress discussed in class, including the dove broach representing peace, I started to search for symbolism in the clothing that Del Rey is wearing on the cover. Artists like Lady Gaga and Lana Del Rey incorporate symbolism in their clothing to send a message to the viewer, whether conscious or unconscious. According to *adobe.com*, white represents purity, honesty, and new beginnings. The daisy flowers in her hair are commonly associated with innocence and youth.

I started connecting these symbols back to the tracks on the album. The opening track, "Love," is an indie rock song that is speaking to the new generation, giving them the confidence to step up and make the world a better place. In the first verse Del Rey sings "You're part of the

past, but now you're the future / Signals crossing can get confusing.” These lyrics reminded me of a quote from “My Strong Clear Vision,” which follows the story of Maya Lin winning a Vietnam Memorial design contest. In a speech featured in the documentary, Lin talks about how art impacts past and future generations stating “It is a dialogue with not only our peers, but with people and times both before and during our time. For each of us cannot be defined by the brief physical time we exist in, but we have the ability to extend that time far beyond our physical existence; we are part of a collective consciousness, connected to one another through time by our work, images, thoughts, and writings. We communicate to future generations what we are, what we have been, hopefully influencing for the better what we will become.” Lana Del Rey, Maya Lin, and Lady Gaga all leave a legacy and inspire future generations through their art. Del Rey and Gaga influence others through their music and style, and Maya Lin keeps history alive through her memorials.

Lana Del Rey’s sister, Chuck Grant, shot all the photography for the album using Kodak Porta 800 film. This film has a noticeable grain and warm tones, which gives the cover a nice summery glow. This film came out in the 1990’s, and it instantly became a fan favorite in the photography community. This method of photography uses past methods to create the present, which will untimely become the past. By using film to capture the photography for the album, Del Rey is using the past to create an iconic image that will be recognized for generations to come. The photograph was then scanned and edited in photoshop to add grain and contrast as well as add the white boarder and album title.

Like the album cover photography, the music videos for the title track “Lust for Life” and the opening track “Love” both make references to the past while adding futuristic elements. Both videos were produced by Clark Jackson, a well-known videographer famous for music videos

such as “Blow” by Kesha (2011), Ghetto Gospel by 2Pac (2005), and Till the World Ends by Britney Spears (2011).

The “Lust for Life” music video starts off with an overview of a galaxy, which zooms out to reveal Lana Del Rey’s green eye. According to *cafeausoul.com*, “A galaxy can symbolize aspirations and the patterns of tomorrow you are shaping through your beliefs.” This symbolism ties into the lyrics “Cause we’re the masters of our own fate / We’re the captains of our own souls.” The video continues to zoom out revealing Del Rey in a red 1960’s inspired dress and headband and white lace gloves. There is a small red rose on the headband, which is a symbol of romance, love, and courage. She is standing behind a vintage microphone with two backup singers framing her. Red symbolizes life, health, courage, love, and danger. The red dress could foreshadow the danger and love represented throughout the rest of the music video as well as the lyrics “They say only the good die young / Well that just ain’t right.” This scene in the video is also where the grain and vintage filter, which are consistent throughout the video, begin. This grain is reminiscent of a VHS tape, and it is used as a transition between scenes.

The next scene shows Del Rey climbing to the top of the H on the Hollywood sign, where she meets The Weeknd, a Canadian rapper and a feature on the track. He is dressed in an all-black captain's suit with circular sunglasses. The color black traditionally represents power, death, evil, and status. The captain's suit is meant to represent power and control, in this case over life and fate. This image also creates a juxtaposition between the health, romance, risk, and youthfulness represented by her red dress and the death and evil that the black reflects.

The “Love” music video has some similarities to the “Lust for Life” music video, but it has a lighter and dreamier feel. The video starts in black and white with Del Rey singing into a

vintage microphone in what looks like a closed-down bar. There is a bass player wearing a button up shirt and wide brimmed hat playing behind her. She is wearing the same 1970's inspired dress that she is wearing on the album cover, and the daisies are scattered throughout her hair.

As the song approaches the chorus “You get ready, you get all dressed up / To go nowhere in particular / Back to work or the coffee shop / Doesn’t matter ‘cause it's enough / To be young and in love / To be young and in love,” the video turns to color and shows a couple in front of the vintage blue pickup truck featured on the album cover. The colored clips are intercut with the black and white clips of Del Rey singing. New clips of teenagers in love and having fun continue to appear. There are also some examples of juxtapositions throughout. Every car shown throughout the video is vintage, but all the technology throughout is modern. This could communicate that our technology will soon be part of the past as it continues to evolve. A clip of a couple at a coffee shop shows them taking pictures on a smartphone, and a group of skateboarders is shown wearing headphones and holding modern cameras. I thought about a question that Dr. Harrington asked during our Prown article discussion: “What does our material culture today say about us as a society and as individuals?” Could the music video be communicating that our technology is evolving so rapidly that we do not take the time to appreciate each step? People still have an appreciation for vintage cars because they were built to last. They were not made to be disposable objects like technology today.

Once Del Rey gets to the second verse, “Look at you, kids, / You know you're the coolest/ The world is yours and you can't refuse it,” the couples from the colored clips appear in an audience under the black and white filter. The next cut reveals that they are sitting in the audience of Del Rey’s show as she sings the pre-chorus. Since Del Rey’s music reflects themes

of youth and prosperity, this scene communicates that she is singing to a younger audience to inspire them to live their lives freely without restricting themselves to societal standards.

The camera cuts to a close up of Del Rey's eye, revealing the same galaxy shown at the beginning of the "Lust for Life" video. However, instead of exiting the galaxy and entering the real world, the audience is taken into the galaxy. The camera cuts back to the audience and pans up revealing a moon and stars above them.

The next scene shows the couple with the blue pickup truck sitting inside of it and floating through the galaxy. The whole video is now in full color, revealing Del Rey singing with the moon as her stage. The couples from the prior clips are now floating through space doing the activities they were doing on earth, but in zero gravity. The use of zero gravity could be used as a metaphor for freedom and optimism. *Lust for Life* was released in 2017, which was the year following the chaotic 2016 election. In this galaxy, Del Rey's inner aspirations for the future are reflected, and the youth are given the opportunity to be free and find who they are without pressures from media and their peers. By showing young couples traveling away from a political and tension-filled world, Del Rey is communicating the power that today's generation holds if they separate themselves from societal expectations.

The art and aesthetic behind the *Lust for Life* album is what makes the album stand out among Lana Del Rey's discography, and it is one of the reasons why I love the album. The album is full of soft color and optimism, which is a drastic change compared to Del Rey's dark and mysterious aesthetic. Because the album portrays so many trends from the 1970's, fans of the album may start to incorporate those trends into their lives through a modern lens.

Lana Del Rey wrote the album *Lust for Life* to inspire future generations. Personally, I find *Lust for Life* to be a fun and upbeat album with complexity and hidden meaning. Every time I listen to the album, I find new references to the past and symbolism communicating what Del Rey hopes for the future. Del Rey's dress on the album covers and in the "Love" music video were inspired by 1970's fashion and how celebrities during that period inspired trends. The album cover photography also inspired me to get into photography using film. I've incorporated this technique into a few projects for my production classes, as well as using Del Rey's music videos as inspiration for video projects. Overall, *Lust for Life* by Lana Del Rey is a light and dreamy album about the potential of the new generation, reminding them that they can make a change but also reminding them to have fun and live life to the fullest.



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