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Title: Goodbye Cruel World

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Example citation: Wiseman-Trowse, N. J. B. (2014) Goodbye Cruel World. *Words For Moods website*.

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Version: Published version

Official URL: <http://wordsformoods.com/wordpress/?p=259>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/6804/>





Articles



Goodbye Cruel World



By author at bottom of page, June 24, 2014

Over the last week I've been driving around listening to the death of popular culture repeated over and over again as loudly as possible. With the window down so that everyone else can hear it too. You might think that this is a bad thing but actually it really isn't.

It all started innocently enough. I was passing through town when I thought that I might pop into HMV and buy the new Lana Del Rey album Ultraviolence. I loved 'Video Games' to pieces from the moment that I first heard it, and the first album was good, some great tracks, could probably do with being about four tracks shorter, loved the swearing and the drugs references and yes, it was all a bit Badalamenti / Lynch / Mazzy Star etc. But it's a little bit unsure of what it wants to be, which is actually part of the charm. For all I know the same is true of Ultraviolence but I can't give any attention to any of it beyond the first track 'Cruel World'. It's the sound of civilisation languorously overdosing face down in a swimming pool.

It doesn't help that it's really hot right now. Del Rey's music has a purposefully crafted decadent Californian aesthetic, perhaps strange for a New Yorker. The intensity that Henry Rollins attributes to East Coast artists is wholly absent with Del Rey, instead her music has always hinted at a narcotised, sun-kissed state of being. So it seems a good time to be driving around with one arm dangling out of the car window, the

bodywork so hot it's hard to leave it there but you have to look cool, at least as cool as you imagine you would if you were Dennis Hopper driving a Chrysler, but you're not and it isn't. But, still...

But 'Cruel World' takes that dead-eyed glamour cool and amps it up until there's nothing but void. As an opening track it's both wholly magisterial and strangely static. The guitars, swathed in acres and acres of reverb, build up a swelling dynamic over and over again but the drums, little more than pulses of damped mallets, refuse to join in. It's like the song is too hot to get up and move, instead it just lies there looking amazing, panting heavily in the sun.

The American writer John Barth coined the phrase 'the Literature of Exhaustion' to describe the death of modernist artistic idealism and the advent of a postmodern sensibility of affectlessness and pastiche. I wouldn't be the first to point to Del Rey's music as being postmodern, of course it's a heady confection of David Lynch directing American Beauty, the US psyche experienced only through popular culture and the stories that it tells itself. But here Lizzie Grant seems to be going beyond the Lana Del Rey pseudonym, Lana's taken over wholly, and Lana's is the music of exhaustion.

This isn't even just a way of saying that she's retro, 'Cruel World' serves up American popular music / culture without there being the possibility of anything else anymore. There isn't even a Lana Del Rey anymore, the song switches subjectivities, confusing the object of the song's narrative with the performer. You're / I'm a mess, you're / I'm fucking crazy, your / my heroin / women. It doesn't matter anymore, it's the sublimation of the western zeitgeist as it evaporates wholly up into the hot June sky with no hope of reprieve. 'Cruel World' is all a-historical immanence and brutal jouissance, beautiful to look at, terrifying to listen to. It's exhausted, exhausting and utterly, utterly astonishing, dragging its own weight over everything else that has ever existed. It's a shame Lars von Trier couldn't have used it to soundtrack the colliding planets at the end of Melancholia.

I have listened to the rest of the tracks on the album, but they seem rather pointless now. As does everything else. I'm going for a drive.

By Nathan Wiseman-Trowse

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