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Topic: The Postmodern Princess: An Analysis of Lana Del Rey's *Tropico*

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**Declaration**

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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## 1.0. Introduction

### 1.1 General Background:

Arguably one of the most influential artists of the 2010s, Lana Del Rey emerged on the music scene with heavily stylised music, containing themes of tragedy, glamour and nostalgic elements that heavily referenced 1950s and 1960s American culture. Initially met with heavy criticism and scrutiny, Del Rey made her breakthrough with her song “Video Games”, which featured her signature homemade, vintage aesthetic, and heavily contrasted the mainstream songs of the time. While her contemporaries sang of empowerment and were lauded for their “authenticity”, Del Rey offered listeners melancholic, tragic romance, with an elegance that seemed to come from a distant past, to the point that it was hard to imagine that she was not playing a role. The public and critics did not take kindly to such an image at the time, viewing her rebranding from wannabe pop star Lizzy Grant to the glamorous Lana Del Rey as an act of inauthenticity. Del Rey was criticised for being an act or a schtick: she was a privileged, rich white girl singing about drugs and the 1960s; was what she sang and wrote about truly authentic?

This attack on her authenticity doubled down after a disastrous performance on *Saturday Night Live*, as put by *New York Times* critic Jon Caramanica:

“Lana Del Rey is a tabula rasa, a punching bag, a reflection of our collective nightmares about American cynicism and disingenuousness.”

Despite the criticism, Del Rey has stuck to her brand of obsessive nostalgia and tragic romance, eventually pioneering a generation of artists who are frequently compared to her, such as Lorde. Del Rey’s references to 50s to 80s American culture can be seen to be part of an

ongoing trend of nostalgia in music and pop culture, as evidenced by the revival of “vintage” styles of music. This nostalgia wave that Del Rey contributed to and helped popularise is yet another criticism some have: if Del Rey has never experienced the eras in which she expresses such great love and longing for, then is her message truly authentic and genuine? By asking this question, the postmodern aspect of Del Rey’s music can be shown, through the complex interpretations of her work, as well as Del Rey’s use of pastiche and intertextuality within her lyrics and music videos.

Despite Del Rey’s proclaimed love for such an alluring, opulent lifestyle, an underlying contradiction exists in her depiction of Hollywood glamour as sinful. This is most present in her 2013 short film *Tropico*, hence I shall be analysing the film as it brings out major themes in Del Rey’s music, and contains several postmodern elements. Given the nature of Del Rey’s lyrics and music videos, the intertextuality and references add a deeper layer of interpretation to her work, and captures the postmodern movement in current day pop music.

## **1.2 Rationale**

With Lana Del Rey’s current critical acclaim, especially for her recent release *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, there is an opportunity to examine how she has evolved from a scrutinised, seemingly inauthentic “fake”, to a musical powerhouse and critically acclaimed songwriter, respected for her lyricism and artistry. Through the analysis of her short film *Tropico*, which contains references to major American cultural icons such as Walt Whitman and Alan Ginsberg, whom she cites as influences on her art, we might be able to identify how she is the embodiment

and a prime example of postmodern culture, and identify her vision for her art, in relation to the criticism and literary works of others.

Del Rey's influence over the musical taste of the current generation is undeniable.

Whereas the majority of early 2000s pop music was filled with optimism and energy, Del Rey signalled the shift into a "sadcore" era, where singers such as Lorde sing about resentment and jealousy in "Royals", or Logic's take on suicide in "1-800-273-8255". Through a postmodern lens, this paper hopes to understand Del Rey's response to criticisms of her artistic identity, but also the postmodern elements within her music.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

1. What are the main themes that are presented in Lana Del Rey's *Tropico*?
2. What is the significance of the various allusions in *Tropico*?
3. With reference to Postmodern Theory (Hassan, 1998), how is Lana Del Rey's *Tropico* a postmodern work of art?

### **1.4. Thesis Statement**

Through the use of allusions to classics such as *Paradise Lost* and references to literary giants such as Walt Whitman, Lana Del Rey seeks to ascend to a position amongst a pantheon of literary and pop culture icons. This desire is exemplified in *Tropico*'s intertextuality, pastiche, and references, solidifying Lana Del Rey's identity as an alluring artist of the postmodern era.

## **1.5. Scope of Research & Delimitations**

My research will be limited to analysing the short film *Tropico*, including the three songs included, which are *Body Electric*, *Gods and Monsters* and *Bel Air*. The release of *Tropico* is a significant point of transition in Del Rey's career: she was leaving behind the critically panned *Born to Die* era, shedding her previous image and moving forward into the acclaimed *Ultraviolence* era. My research seeks to understand what changed in Del Rey's image to spark this shift in perception by analysing *Tropico* as a representation of this change. The sheer length of *Tropico*, being 27 minutes, means that it was able to allow her artistry and style to fully manifest, pushing across complex ideas which a normal music video would not be able to. The poems recited in *Tropico*, Walt Whitman's *I Sing the Body Electric* and Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* shall be included as paratexts which the viewer is already aware of. In my multimodal analysis, lyrics and visuals are included in the analysis, and also certain interpretations of the film by reviewers.

## **1.6. Significance of Research & Usefulness**

In a generation where we reminisce on the "good old days" and music styles of the past are popular, Del Rey plays a prominent role with her glamorization of hopelessness and Hollywood opulence. To understand what elements in her music enraptures, yet deeply saddens listeners of her music is to understand Del Rey's prominence and place in the current postmodern culture.

Nostalgia is a trendy aesthetic in current pop culture, as Josh Duboff states in a 2018 *Vanity Fair* article. Pop music is “obsessed with the late 90s”, and Duboff notes that artists such as Charli XCX and Troye Sivan, with their song “1999”, are “leaning into a form of nostalgia for an era they’re barely old enough to remember”. This trend has continued, with prominent artists such as Dua Lipa releasing albums inspired by 80s dance-pop trends in 2020. Our current obsession with nostalgia extends to social media apps as well.

This reveals one of the key issues that critics have with Del Rey: her nostalgic lyrics with callbacks to vintage iconography and subject matter has been attacked as inauthentic, yet other artists’ use of nostalgic elements are celebrated. This raises the question: who has a right to be nostalgic in their music, and why do critics take so unkindly to the form of nostalgia Del Rey presents?

While her glamorous presentation of past icons and culture may seem like Del Rey’s appreciation and nostalgia for a time that she did not have the ability to experience, it may also be an examination of these icons. After heavy criticism regarding her subject matter and artistic choices, an analysis of *Tropico* could reveal her opinions and rebuttals to her critics, as well as her attempts to confer artistic credit to her often discredited music. The criticisms of Del Rey’s work show a lack of understanding and appreciation for pastiche and postmodern art among critics. Del Rey’s exploration of originality, specifically how in the postmodern era, shows how no works can be truly independent and original, and how imitations may sometimes be more thought-provoking than the original works.

## 1.7. Limitations

As Lana Del Rey is still actively putting out new songs and poems, and her messages continuously evolve with the progression of her persona and songwriting, this paper is limited to her existing work and based on interpretations of the messages in *Tropico*. Since Del Rey's music has shifted its message since the release of *Tropico*, I will analyse *Tropico* not only in relation to Del Rey's message at the time, but also with reference to subsequent works of hers, which often repeat elements from her own past works, and interacting with her lyrics from other songs.

## **2.0. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Defining Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is a complex term, including the set of artistic features and zeitgeist of the current era, such as skepticism of authority and the rejection of Modernist ideologies in the Postmodern moment. The Postmodern era can be seen as the response to, and rejection of Enlightenment and Modernist prioritizations of rationality, absolute truth, and the importance of knowledge. While there is no consensus on when exactly the Postmodern era began, postmodern literature was at its peak post World War II, with the emergence of writers such as Alan Ginsberg and Vladimir Nabokov (Felluga, 2015). Interestingly, both writers have been referenced by Del Rey, in *Tropico*, showcasing the heavy influence postmodern literature has had on her music. Postmodern avant-garde features the use of techniques such as “contradiction and stylistic imitation” (Bishop, Starkey, 2006), as well as the presence of elements such as intertextuality and self-reflexivity (Hassan, 1998).

#### **2.1.1. Intertextuality**

One of the key elements of postmodern literature is intertextuality. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva, and she defines it as “the transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another”. Texts are connected to one another through “citations, quotations, allusions, borrowings, adaptations, appropriations, parody, pastiche, imitations and the like” (D’Angelo, 2010). In the postmodern age, it is difficult to view concepts and ideas, much less literary works

as isolated, hence, texts are viewed not just individually, but also through their relationship to other texts. D'Angelo draws out six forms of intertextuality: adaptation, retro, parody, appropriation, pastiche and simulation, which can be observed not only in literature, but also in pop culture. I will be examining retro and pastiche, as these are notable forms of intertextuality which are observed within *Tropico*.

Retro is a style reminiscent of the past, heavily related to nostalgia, which Del Rey is notably known for. While nostalgia might be the longing for an idealised, glorified past, which is associated with Del Rey's music, retro often involves ironic attitudes towards earlier styles (Grainge, 2000). Retro is a form of intertextuality since it repurposes and recycles past aesthetics and styles to fit a modern text or art form. *Tropico* has a noticeable retro influence, shown by the caricature-esque parodies of John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. This retro aesthetic serves a purpose as well, adding new meaning to the text. Fetveit (2015) interprets the references to 50s and 60s culture as an "overused, nearly used up" form of nostalgia, embodying imperfection instead of stardom, due to their hollow appearances as mere mockeries or parodies. This presentation of the three pop culture icons is a form of iconoclastic nostalgia: a criticism of the imperfection of these cultural figureheads, and the results when we place these pop culture figures into our pantheon of gods and attempt to ascend to a level of existence alike to theirs.

Pastiche, which is a key element of postmodern literature, is also a form of intertextuality. Pastiche can be seen as a patchwork of borrowed styles, fragments, motifs or ingredients from another source (D'Angelo, 2010). However, it differs from parody due to its neutrality, whereas parody's ulterior motive is to deceive and satirise. Pastiche is a form of intertextuality not only due to the way it blends and combines quotes or elements of multiple

texts together, but even genres. *Tropico* makes heavy use of pastiche, through Del Rey's reciting of various poems by Walt Whitman and Alan Ginsberg, combined with her own music and an aesthetic referencing the Garden of Eden.

The various styles present in *Tropico* such as the retro aesthetic are postmodern and forms of intertextuality. *Tropico* reminds us that no text is an island: every borrowed text interacts with the short film in order to demonstrate how Del Rey's persona is a product of past works and culture.

### **2.1.2. Self-Reflexivity and Narratives**

Postmodern art and literature questions the status quo, and is distrustful of singular narratives and truths. This is manifested in its questioning of traditional concepts such as temporality and religion (Felluga, 2015), and can also be observed in *Tropico*, through its criticism of icons of the past.

One way in which narratives can be challenged is through metafiction. Metafiction seeks to foreground the artificiality of the work by being conscious of the use of language, literary form and storytelling (Rüdiger, 1986). While metafiction has existed for far longer than postmodernism, its questioning of language systems to highlight artificiality is greatly similar to Postmodern and Post-structuralist theory. Not only does metafiction undermine the authority of the author, as well as open up the literary work to a multitude of perspectives and interpretations, it also comments on the way we construct our experience in the world, utilising intertextual references and allusions, as well as violating narrative structures through methods such as the writer involving himself or herself in their work.

Metafiction is tied to self-reflexivity and self-awareness, which is prevalent in postmodern works, sometimes playful and even irreverent (Felluga, 2015), which can be observed in *Tropico*. *Tropico*'s metafictional nature and self-reflexivity go hand in hand: *Tropico* is self-reflexive in the sense that it parallels Del Rey's own experiences, and metafictional since Del Rey herself plays the main character. In meta-artistic films, the unconventional methods "[reveal] familiar things in radically unfamiliar but persuasive new shapes" (Lantz, 2016). This mirrors the use of iconic pop culture figures in *Tropico*, which adds to the contradictory nature of Del Rey's relationships with these icons.

*Tropico* is very much a work where the viewer is meant to understand that Del Rey is constructing a narrative for us to follow. *Tropico* is a form of indirect metafiction: the parodies and imitations of Jesus, Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne and Elvis Presley, the blend of settings such as the Garden of Eden and Los Angeles, as well as the structure of the film being borrowed from the biblical tale of sin and redemption are references which impact the viewing of the original texts and *Tropico*. This alerts the viewer that the film cannot be taken as a typical story or narrative, and draws attention to the contradictions within the film's messages: the simultaneous criticism and adoration of L.A. culture, past pop icons, opulence, sensuality, and more.

### 3.0. Methodology

In order to accurately analyse the themes and messages in *Tropico*, this analysis will be a multimodal analysis, taking into consideration multiple modes of communication such as visuals and audio, and how they interact to create new meaning. “Resources other than language, in interaction with each other and with language – such as gesture, gaze, proxemics, dress, visual and aural art, image-text relation and page-layout, cinematographic and sound design and production resources” are taken into account in a multimodal analysis. As *Tropico* is not just a film, but also a music video, the lyrics and visuals have to be analysed in tandem, especially with the symbols and imagery evoked in the video.

Additionally, since Lana Del Rey’s “brand” and music have been analysed by critics and written about previously, *Tropico* cannot be understood independently of the context in which it was produced. *Tropico* has to be viewed and analysed with a New Historicist<sup>1</sup> lens: the symbols, imagery and storyline of the film cannot be interpreted without taking into account prior knowledge about Del Rey’s career and motivations as an artist.

For the sake of clarity, my analysis of *Tropico* will be separated into three sections, each following a main theme or concept that Del Rey tries to convey, how it ties into my thesis and Postmodern Theory.

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<sup>1</sup> New Historicism: a literary theory which views history and literature through its cultural context and as a product of its time

#### 4.0. Discussion and Analysis

*Tropico* borrows the structure of its narrative heavily from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is why the film can be broken down into three distinct sections: the "fall from grace", "sin and corruption", and the "transcendence". This structure, as well as the prominent religious imagery is a way in which Del Rey attempts to gain credibility: by drawing parallels between a great classic and the story of her own downfall and eventual rise, Del Rey gives greater significance and grandeur to her own art, as a response to the criticism she had suffered since her debut in 2011.

However, while the use of these parallels and allusions legitimises her work, it is also ironic in the sense that Del Rey had been frequently attacked for being "inauthentic", and attempting to compare herself to such great works could be seen as pretentious. After all, it was an extremely bold claim for a pop singer to compare her own works to notable works by esteemed writers and poets.

Yet, this pretentiousness has an underlying contradiction: some critics view *Tropico* as "listless art that believes itself to be art", or as film critic Manny Farber calls it, "bloated, pretentious and untouchable" (*The Daily Beast*, 2013). In saying so, critics such as Farber miss the message and style of *Tropico*: the overbearing, deliberately cheesy visuals and pretentious "depth" of the themes Del Rey tries to convey in the film make it almost a form of kitsch<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the article points out that Del Rey comes across in her music videos as a "god you can never really know", yet fails to make the connection between this aura of "divinity" around

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<sup>2</sup> Art or objects which are considered to be in poor taste, but "so bad it's good". Though art-educated people may view kitsch as fake, typical consumers may be deceived into thinking that they are feeling "something deep and serious" (Scruton, 2014)

Del Rey and the subject matter of *Tropico*: Del Rey’s godlike imagery and persona are not merely a pretentious attempt at being more than just a pop singer, but to become a “god” of pop culture.

#### 4.1. Icons and Worship



*Fig 1: Tropico’s depiction of pop culture icons demonstrates a postmodern, tongue in cheek art style in its refusal to portray the characters earnestly.*

The opening of *Tropico* is an obvious parody of the Bible, as the film opens with a narration of the opening lines of the Bible. However, instead of “God”, the creator of this world in *Tropico* is “John”, referring to John Wayne. As Wayne is an icon of American culture in the 1950s to 1970s, it is no surprise that Del Rey would choose to portray John Wayne as the creator of the world in *Tropico*, given that John Wayne can be seen as one of the creators of the very American culture Del Rey is obsessed with in her music. Wayne is also an embodiment of the all-American, heroic, masculine older man, a figure that Del Rey has expressed her attraction towards. This portrayal of John Wayne as God also explains why she chooses to frame other American icons such as Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe as godlike figures, frolicking in the Garden of Eden alongside Jesus.

The choice to put these great cultural icons in Eden was not merely an aesthetic choice: throughout Del Rey's career, her fascination with 60s to 80s American culture meant that to her, the "purest", most ideal form of pop culture was embodied by the idols she depicted in the Garden of Eden, hence their divine, holy auras. Yet, these portrayals come across as hollow caricatures, mere mockeries or parodies of the original. Fetveit (2015) states that

"[Elvis, Marilyn and John] epitomise imperfection more than star quality, as if they were enlisted from an impersonator contest at the local dive bar"

Throughout the opening of *Tropico*, Monroe, Presley and Wayne recite their most famous quotes and lyrics, prancing around and posing exaggeratedly. This caricaturization of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and John Wayne is an expression of Del Rey's belief that she belongs with these cultural giants, and also a manifestation of the postmodern art style of this film, in the sense that it refuses to portray these icons too seriously, instead employing a playful, mocking tone. In her eyes, if these figures are allowed to be imperfect, flawed, and we are allowed to mock and criticise them, then Del Rey has every right to stand beside them, regardless of the imperfections that the media brings up about her music, image, identity, or career. Del Rey's cynicism and criticism of these three icons is in no way contradictory or in opposition with her borderline "worship" of these icons, but instead, work in tandem to show why Del Rey herself is worthy of such worship.

In *Body Electric*, Del Rey recognizes her roots, and that her artistry was spawned by the 50s culture she worships, in the lines:

"Elvis is my daddy

Marilyn's my mother"

The next line, “Jesus is my bestest friend”, not only places her as an equal to Jesus, a figure of great divinity, but also engages in irony and self-awareness, given that Del Rey’s lyrics about, and interest in sex, death, alcohol and drugs are greatly contradictory to the ideals Jesus represents. This perhaps is also Del Rey’s mockery of American evangelism, given that she states in *Gods and Monsters*:

“Me and God we don’t get along”

Del Rey’s impurity and rebelling against Christian values is shown not only through her provocative dancing with a snake, but also in the lyrics “dancing and grinding” and “drop it like it’s hot”, both references to sexual dance moves that are associated with partying and by extension, an “impure” lifestyle. While Del Rey references the Virgin Mary “praying the rosary for [her] broken mind”, this apparent “purity” is also a double entendre: “Mary Jane” is another name for marijuana, and Del Rey may be referring to the fact that she uses marijuana to fix her broken emotional state.

This conflict between purity, impurity, and sensuality is further emphasised by the title *Body Electric*, which refers to the Walt Whitman poem “*I Sing the Body Electric*”. In the poem, Whitman refutes the Christian belief that the soul and the body are separate, instead suggesting that the soul and the body are a whole, thus praising and stressing the importance of sensuality. Del Rey’s agreement with Whitman’s take on sexuality and the importance of the physical body goes beyond the title, with the lyric “Whitman is my daddy”, accompanied by a shot of a tattoo which reads “Nabokov Whitman”, both writers who are known for works of sexuality and impurity’. Similarly to how Del Rey views herself as a product of the cultural icons of the 50s, she not only agrees with these writers’ takes on sex, but her own personal philosophy is also

derived from theirs. Despite Del Rey playing “Eve”, she is in agreement with these “impure” ideals, including opulence, though she seems to acknowledge the destruction that it will bring through the line “opulence is the end”.

As the song closes, “Adam” and “Eve” eat the apple, and are cast out of the Garden of Eden. For indulging in the “body electric”, embracing sensuality, decadence and impurity, they have violated the pure nature of Eden, and thus were banished, mirroring Del Rey’s own career and her transformation into a pariah of the pop industry.

It is also in the first act in which *Tropico* is most postmodern. While the other acts borrow from and interact with other texts, the scenes in the Garden of Eden blatantly imitate the Bible through the presence of the Tree of Knowledge, “Jesus”, “Adam” and “Eve”, and an outfit resembling the Virgin Mary, using the aura of divinity to capture Del Rey’s message about placing imperfect pop culture icons into our pantheon of gods.

#### **4.2. Identity and Originality**



*Fig 2: Del Rey’s fall from Eden results in her relishing in a lifestyle of drugs, smoking and stripping, a stark departure from the initial “purity” of the Garden of Eden.*

In the second act, “Adam” and “Eve” awaken in Los Angeles, working at a convenience store and a strip club. Los Angeles is not only significant because of the translation of its name as the “City of Angels”, but also because of its position as the birthing grounds of much of American culture. To Del Rey, Los Angeles holds a different meaning, as she puts it:

“Los Angeles, The city of Angels, A land of Gods and Monsters, The in-between realm where only the choices made from your free will, will decide your soul’s final fate ”

To Del Rey, the appeal of Los Angeles was not just its cultural significance, but also the fact that Los Angeles was a city which allowed Del Rey to shape her own image and become whoever she wished to be. To an artist like Del Rey searching for a way to solidify her artistic persona, Los Angeles played a key role in shaping her identity.

However, Del Rey’s appreciation for Los Angeles is perhaps exemplified by her comparison between Los Angeles and Eden as purgatory and paradise respectively, showing her ability to accept the duality of the city. In the song *Gods and Monsters*, Del Rey refers to Los Angeles as the “garden of Evil”, even as she participates in the very “trashy”, “sinful” culture she criticises. As a “pure” soul in Los Angeles, it was only a matter of time before “Adam” and “Eve” were tainted by the filth of the city, removing them even further from the godhood they aspired to obtain. Despite the sex and promiscuity associated with stripping, as well as the “sinful” activities depicted such as smoking and drinking, Del Rey narrates a verse from *Body Electric*, praising the sexuality and physical attributes of the human body, almost as a justification of the sexual nature of her life in Los Angeles.

Beyond the commentary about the nature of Los Angeles, Del Rey acknowledges the nature of her artistry and reception by the media in *Gods and Monsters*, referring to herself as “a

groupie incognito, posing as a real singer”, remarking that “life imitates art”, referencing a quote by Oscar Wilde. By saying so, Del Rey suggests that her inspiration from past icons can be considered a form of artistry, and that perhaps originality *can* be found within “fakes” or imitations. This self-reflexivity implies that Del Rey was a “fake”, inauthentic artist as the media described, but the line “life imitates art” reframes this dishonesty in her artistry, suggesting that Del Rey’s persona was merely an imitation of her inspirations, hence her distinct fashion style which sparked comparisons to Nancy Sinatra or Priscilla Presley.

Del Rey also explores the impact on one’s identity that worshipping icons can bring about. In the second act, Del Rey chooses to recite a section of Alan Ginsberg’s *Howl*, using its tone of despair and angst about the mental anguish of those cast out by society as a self-reference to her own journey as an artist, being cast out by the media and becoming a pariah.

On a larger scale, the “dreams, drugs [and] waking nightmares” in *Howl*, could also be an expression of Del Rey’s desire to “[live] like Jim Morrison” as she states in *Gods and Monsters*: fast, wild, and dangerously. The negative portrayal of this desire may come across as contradictory given Del Rey’s glamorisation of a lifestyle of opulence and danger, but is also her criticism of the consequences of worshipping and imitating cultural icons and their lifestyles. Through this self-awareness, as well as the interaction between *Tropico* and *Howl*, the postmodern aspects of the film are highlighted as Del Rey demonstrates how she uses the works of a previously established artist to solidify her artistic identity.

The second act revolves around the pitfalls of attempting to reach the same level of “divinity” as the cultural icons depicted in Eden: disrupting the natural hierarchy by trying to

transcend to another level is met with punishment. Del Rey expresses this outright in the interlude, mentioning that

“from being created in his likeness, to being banished for wanting to be too much like him, we were cast out”

The contradiction between being created in the likeness of “God”, then being cast out for attempting to become *even* more like “God” reveals Del Rey’s underlying rebuttal to her critics: if she, and modern pop culture by extension were products of the revered pop icons, then Del Rey did not deserve to be criticised for trying to transcend to this level of stardom, suggesting that everyone, especially Del Rey herself, was worthy of ascending to the pantheon of pop culture, regardless of the dangerous consequences.

Thus, through intertextuality, as well as Del Rey’s appreciation of the nature of Los Angeles, *Tropico* allows Del Rey to shape her desired identity, in an effort to parallel her inspirations, but also recognise the risks of mimicking the “gods” of pop culture.

### **4.3. Divinity and “Paradise”**

In the first act, set in the Garden of Eden, we get a glimpse at the first form of paradise: brightly coloured, fuzzy, warm - with an aura of holiness and unobtainability. As the song *Body Electric* plays, the film cuts between various shots of “Adam” and “Eve” dancing provocatively while surrounded by lambs, a snake and a unicorn. Adam and Eve’s sensuous relationship calls back to *Paradise Lost*, depicting an intimate, perfect love, in an innocent, pure paradise, as represented by the lambs, and the snake is an obvious reference to Satan’s form as a snake, representing the impurity present in this paradise, which is the main conflict of the first act. The

surreal imagery seeks to distort our perception of Eden, a bizarre paradise that seems to be fraying at the seams, just like the innocence and purity in the film, which casts doubt on whether or not this “paradise” is truly desirable.

In the final act of *Tropico*, “Adam” and “Eve” rid themselves of the sin of Los Angeles, leaving behind their material possessions and life of opulence, drugs and crime. This “cleansing” is represented by the baptism, as well as the obvious transition from black to white clothing. While this can be interpreted as Del Rey becoming “pure”, free of sin and thus worthy of godhood, Del Rey’s conception of heaven and her ultimate goal seems to be in opposition to this idea, given that in *Bel Air*, she seeks “roses, Bel Air”, symbols of wealth and opulence. Del Rey’s ideal paradise has evolved throughout *Tropico* from an Eden-esque setting, to one which resembles a stereotypical Hollywood portrayal of upper class Los Angeles, symbolising a growth in which she realises that she does not have to be confined to previous definitions of “paradise”.

At the end of the film, Del Rey has come to terms with the fact that she cannot in fact parallel the ascension to godhood that the icons she idolises went through, and as a result, has to find her own unique version of transcendence. As “Adam” and “Eve” rise into the sky and disappear with an ethereal glow, UFOs appear briefly, signalling that what we are seeing is foreign, unique and never before seen, alluding to that fact that Del Rey has transcended with a new persona, one that is no longer defined by her predecessors. Ironically, the film’s final shots are accompanied by a cover of “Always On My Mind”, most famously covered by Elvis Presley, suggesting that even as she creates her new and independent narrative, she cannot escape the influences of previous generations of artists, a greatly postmodern concept in that every source and text can never be entirely original. The appearance of UFOs also demonstrates an overt

attempt to be unconventional and disorienting, with Mandler stating that his intention when creating *Tropico* was for it to be “Felliniesque<sup>3</sup>”, which makes *Tropico* a more metafictional work, given that metafiction frequently rejects conventional plots (Orlowski, 2017). By adding a layer of ambiguity and confusion to the narrative, *Tropico* becomes even more of a postmodern work of art, hence the distrust in a singular narrative and explanation of its ending.

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<sup>3</sup> Similar in style to films by director Federico Fellini, known for surreal, extravagant imagery.

## 5.0. Conclusion

*Tropico* is a bizarre film. From the hazy imagery, dreamy visuals and contradictory messages, it can be tough to see how the viewer is meant to derive a core message or “moral of the story” from viewing it. *Tropico* can be said to be postmodern in that sense as well: there is no singular narrative or core idea to grasp in the film, instead it is an exploration of one’s relationship to icons and culture, in this case, Del Rey and her relationship to Los Angeles, and the various celebrities depicted.

Ultimately, *Tropico* is not merely Del Rey’s attempt at joining the pantheon of cultural icons, but her acknowledgment of her roots, and the ways in which she is influenced by and has been created by these icons. By understanding this inherent interconnectedness and intertextuality in *Tropico*, and by extension the rest of the media we consume, not only can we better understand Del Rey’s artistic persona, but also the postmodern condition in which we experience. In the end, *Tropico* has indeed achieved its goal: Lana Del Rey has grown out of her “big beauty queen” hairstyle and Marilyn Monroe image, into an artist who is not entirely independent from the influences of the past, but still a writer on her own path.

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