

The Relatable Lorde of Glamour:

A Cultural Contradiction of Rejecting and Accepting Popular Culture

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INTRODUCTION:

“I’m little, but I’m coming for the crown”. The line from the chorus of Lorde’s song “Still Sane” perfectly sums up the trajectory of the singer’s stardom. She came from the suburbs of New Zealand, from the *little*, and definitely won the crown for queen of the postmodern teenager experience. Our Lorde and savior, the voice of a generation, achieved the status of international pop star not only by expressing today’s youth’s desires, fascination for wealth and materialism, and rejection of popular culture, but also by depicting herself as authentic and real. In spite of attending A-list events and hanging out with other celebrities, Lorde’s honesty and authenticity still allow her to be marked as “one of us”.

The merging of normal and glamour is familiar in the construct of stars’ personae. In *Stars*, Richard Dyer argues that stardom “combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary” (35). He also argues that the relationship between star and audience is built upon the intensification of common features or conflicts experienced by

everyone (32). Thus, these relationships are “between stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture”, and can be seen as ways of stars “heroically living out tensions or painfully exposing them” (31). In this way, according to Dyer, star images function within contradictions between ideologies of a culture, which they try to manage, resolve, expose or reject by embodying an alternative position to dominant ideology (34). There are extreme ambiguities and contradictions concerning stars as ordinary and special, so are stars just like you or me or does stardom and glamour transform them into something different?

Lorde manages to maintain a double persona: at the same time that she is a relatable, normal and non-special teenager from the suburbs, “one of us”, she is also a part of the glamorous pop star world. She embodies contradictions of ordinary versus special, unpolished versus glamorous, and rejection versus consumption. On a larger spectrum, Lorde’s star persona sets her apart from the pop culture that she critiques as inauthentic while still working within its boundaries. She depends on pop culture to ultimately make a point about rejecting it and, as a result, Lorde exposes the cultural contradiction of the desire to go against consumer culture while still taking part in it. She exposes the wish to reject popular culture, but still buys into its products, buying into the idea of rejecting mainstream-pop conventions.

THE RELATABLE LORDE:

According to Dyer in *Stars*, a star’s image of authenticity and honesty comes from the assumption that “advertisers, public relation counsels, salesmen, promoters, [etc], [...] are systematically manipulating symbols in order to gain power or prestige or

income. It is the expression of a wish to be considered as a person rather than a potential client or customer” that makes an artist feel authentic, honest, real and relatable (29). This theory very much applies to Lorde, as the song that got her famous, “Royals”, criticized consumerism culture with lines like “But every song's like gold teeth, grey goose, tripping in the bathroom / Blood stains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room / We don't care, we're driving Cadillacs in our dreams”. By expressing her rejection and denial of these commonly desired material things, Lorde constructs a believable authentic and honest self. Because she criticizes the system that she is in, she appears more real and down to earth.

One of the reasons for why Lorde is relatable is because she is a product of what Dyer calls the *myth of success*. As developed in the star system, it suggests that the American society is open for anyone to be successful. In relation to stardom, there are several contradicting elements functioning in the success myth, such as ordinariness being a distinctive feature of the star; the system rewarding talent (specialness); luck launching a star's career; and hard work being necessary to get to the top of stardom (42). In this sense, Lorde gives hope to the American Dream by encompassing all of these four elements: she is ordinary for being from New Zealand's First-World-excluded suburbs, for not following traditional conventions of music or beauty, for being just like us; she was rewarded two Grammy Awards for her talent; she was lucky with the launch of her career, as it was a result of her first EP going viral; and she worked really hard, as she started writing her songs when she was 12 years old, but only launched them at 16 (Daytona Beach News).

As pointed out by Vogue.com film and TV critic Nathan Heller’s article “Lorde: The Music Phenomenon of the Year”, her debut album, *Pure Heroine*, is very much about the experience of being young and living under the shadows of the modern First World. In her song “Team”, Lorde sings “We live in cities / You’ll never see on-screen / Not very pretty, but we sure know how to run things” emphasizing her upbringing in a little and excluded world to which no one paid attention. It points to that fact that she knows how it is to be a nobody in our social media attention-needy world, making her relatable to today’s youth.

In the VEVO LIFT UK video interview “World According to Lorde”, from early on in her career, Lorde established herself as a normal person and a common and relatable teenager. Interviews like this strengthen the link between her and her young audience as she describes herself in ways that a lot of “real world” teenagers would. Unlike top celebrities, but similar to most people, in this video Lorde talks about getting star-struck, enjoying McDonald’s breakfast, and seeing herself as “not that cool”.

“World According to Lorde” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SE5dma2cak)

Interactive Video Annotations:



0:00:24 – Rap Music: Lorde talking about how listening to rap music makes her feel cooler.



I've always really liked Kanye. I met him on Jools Holland. He was wearing a grill on his lower teeth

I had this like, barely suppressed desire to rub the grill. We're ok. Didn't rub the grill.

0:00:30 Kanye West: Stars-struck: Lorde describing the moment in which she met Kanye West and was star-struck.



Hash browns! Get up early enough for McDonald's breakfast. That's like... Have you had those hash browns?!

0:01:02 McDonald's Breakfast: Lorde showing how much she loves McDonald's Breakfast.



I did absolutely roast this one dude. I really love the new Miley Cyrus song Wrecking Ball



and he was like "meh you're not an artist, you like Miley Cyrus" and I was like "sit down!"

0:01:46 Wrecking Ball: Here Lorde shows how she is a regular person by being subject to listening to mainstream pop music and being criticized for it.

In discussing her debut EP for *Interview Magazine*, Lorde also said:

“Around the middle of last year I started listening to a lot of rap, like Nicki Minaj and Drake, as well as pop singers like Lana Del Rey. They all sing about such opulence, stuff that just didn't relate to me—or anyone that I knew. I began thinking, ‘How are we listening to this? It's completely irrelevant.’ I basically just wrote what we were all thinking.” (Fleming)

In this quote, Lorde points to the fact that in her lyrics she is writing about not only her personal experience and feelings towards popular music, but also everyone else's. “I basically just wrote what we were all thinking” refers to how her, touching on her desire to reject consumerism and the forced luxury of popular culture, is universal. This also goes back to what Dyer argued, that stars have a connection with their fans by sharing, exposing or representing some central common conflict or feeling experienced by everyone. Here Lorde is representing her fans' feelings along with her own.

Emphasizing her representation of a larger group of people, of a generation, is how she sings “*We* will never be royals” in the song “Royals” (Heller). By saying “we”, Lorde is positioning herself on the same level as her listeners. She is not only writing from her perspective, but she is also writing from other teenagers' perspectives as she invites them to be a part of this collective message. In her use of “we”, Lorde then becomes the voice of a generation, a voice for today's youth.

“Royals” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFasFq4GJYM) Interactive Video

Annotations:



0:00:09 Mundane Suburban: *The music video's mundane montages of suburbia make the video feel ordinary and relatable; there is nothing special to it.*



0:00:23 Teenagers and Plain Rooms: *Teenagers going about their days and plain rooms also give the video a mundane atmosphere and feeling.*



0:01:56 Not Selling Anything: *The video does not attempt to sell anything that is traditionally seen in mainstream pop music videos, like sex, cars, mansions, drugs, alcohol, etc.*



0:02:57 Lorde's Video Description: *As Lorde writes in the video's description,*

"a lot of people think teenagers live in this world like 'skins' every weekend or whatever, but truth is, half the time we aren't doing anything cooler than playing with lighters, or waiting at some shitty stop. that's why this had to be real. and i'm at that particular train station every week. those boys are my friends." (Lorde)

This comes to show that she intentionally chose to show these very mundane and ordinary scenes to make the music video relatable and real.

The themes that Lorde talks about are also very ordinary, common and relatable. Interviewed for Vogue.com, she confessed that after having the experience of traveling and visiting the biggest cities in the world, she realized how much she appreciated where she had grown up and started asking herself questions like “Do I want to grow up? Do I want to leave the suburbs?” (Heller). This coming-of-age theme also creates a relatable connection between her and her audience/fanbase. Because everyone goes through this search for identity when growing up, her teenage audience is able to relate to her, to see themselves in her, and to be represented by her.

THE LORDE OF GLAMOUR:

Yes, Lorde is a real person just like us, but she is also a part of the dazzling pop star world. Among all of those references to her being a relatable and ordinary teenager, there are two ways through which she constantly reminds us of her glamorous life: fashion and friendship.



As Dyer points out, fashion and notions of beauty (charm, glamour, etc.) is able to elevate a star's status. A high fashion designer, when linked to a star, gives them "connotations of high society, European 'taste' and exclusiveness" (38).

In the 2016 Met Gala, for example, Lorde showed up wearing a Valentino dress; a handmade Italian designer haute-couture dress that, by association with European taste and high monetary value, set

her apart from the rest of the world and marked her as a part of the exclusive high society.

In the same interview with *Vogue* mentioned earlier, even though it is written that she was wearing knitted gray pants and a t-shirt, Lorde still reminds us of her high social

status and belonging to a glamorous world by naming “Comme des Garçons, Miu Miu, Moschino, and Simone Rocha among her favorite [high fashion] labels” (Heller).

As for friendship, Lorde’s public relationships with other celebrities also emphasize her glamorous stardom. Countless posts on her Instagram register her friendships to other A-listers, verifying her status of pop star. One example of this is the set of photos that she posted for her 20th birthday, which featured her celebrating with other celebrities. A specific photo of Lorde, kissed playfully on the cheeks by Taylor Swift and model Karlie Kloss, normalizes their relationship with the caption:



“had the best birthday party i've ever had tonight surrounded by my nyc family. all organised by tay who is as she says "a mom with no kids". i am ur kid and u love me so hard i could burst. here's to our 3 magic years of best friendship and more moments like this squished between angels”. (@lordemusic, November 7, 2016)

The way Lorde calls them family and best friends normalizes these relationships, making her look like a natural pop star.

MANAGING CONTRADICTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA:

The way Lorde manages to sustain her image in between the ordinary and the special is by sharing her life and thoughts with her fans on social media. She might post

photos of herself in exclusive and glamorous situations every now and

then, but most of the time she also shares her personal and honest

experiences. In 2016, Lorde posted several photos of her wearing the

aforementioned Valentino dress at the Met Gala, but in one post's caption

(@lordemusic, May 3, 2016) she wrote

about how awkward she

looked in that environment.

She also did not try to hide the fact that she had a cast

on her left arm - she even captioned a photo

"FIBREGLASS AND TULLE" (@lordemusic,

May 3, 2016). She played

along with it and wore it

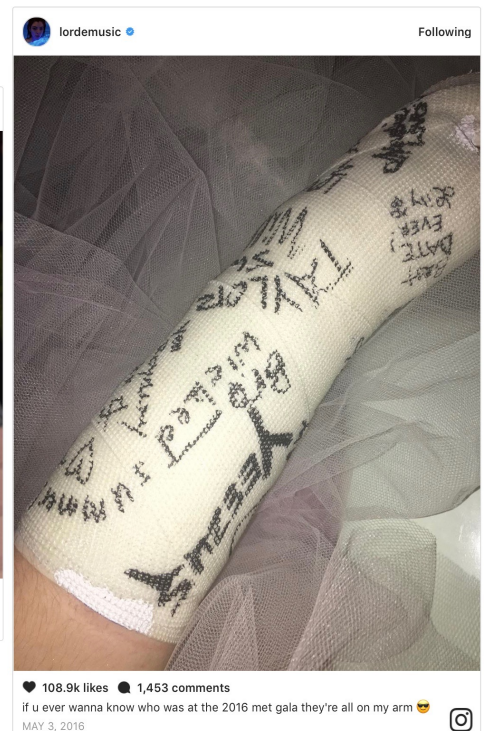
proudly to the biggest



122.2k likes 909 comments
will not get over this handmade degas-ballerina valentino forever and ever ps MY FACE JUST LOOKS LIKE THAT! i'm obviously thrilled to be at the damn met gala, it's just that my heart is racing and i am very inquisitive in those situations hence curious little stare/haven't yet mastered the smize ok
MAY 3, 2016



102.5k likes 484 comments
FIBREGLASS AND TULLE
MAY 3, 2016



108.9k likes 1,453 comments
if u ever wanna know who was at the 2016 met gala they're all on my arm 😂
MAY 3, 2016

fashion event of the year, which most celebrities would never do. The cast, which was signed by many celebrities present at the event (@lordemusic, May 3, 2016), put against the Valentino dress, made Lorde embody the contradiction of her persona: of the everyday versus the spectacular.

She also posted about being invited to Kanye West's exclusive fashion show (@lordemusic, September 15, 2015) and did not hide the fact that she had a terrible rash on her eye and that it gave her extreme anxiety (@lordemusic, September 16, 2015). Once again, Lorde embodies her contradiction of unpolished versus glamorous and exposes it in her social media to maintain her stardom and relatability.

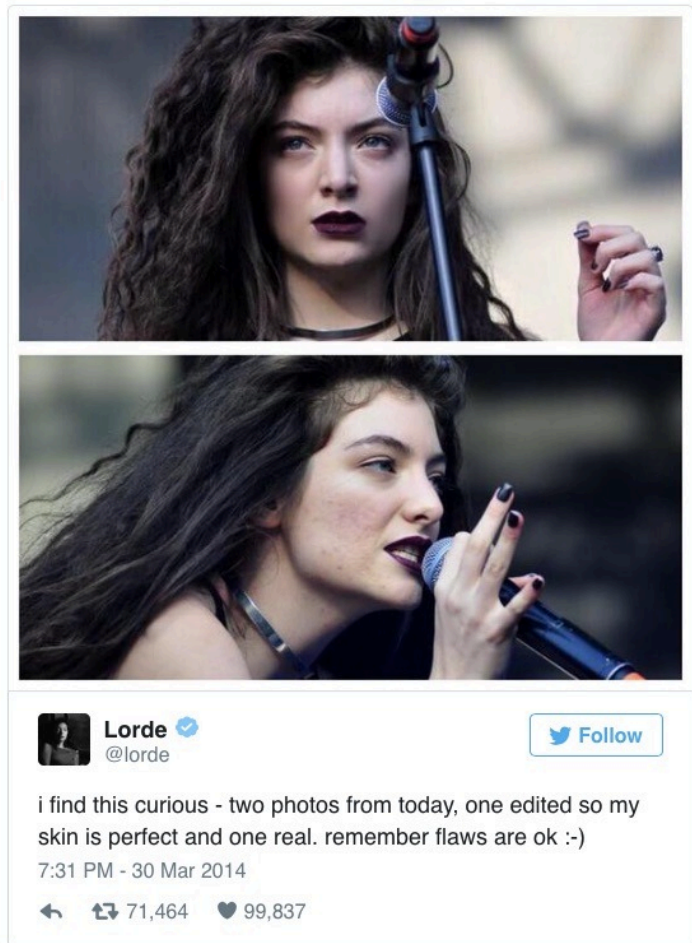


167.2k likes 3,904 comments

the skin is peeling off my lips and hands these days i very rarely see the sun and my eye is weeping and screaming and it's fashion week and everyone already thinks i'm strange and it's a kanye show where the freaks are beautiful so why not say fuck it and let's dance with the melodrama? ps. the show was crazy i got to wear sneakers and had the best bear hug from drizzy and now i'm in bed in a sweater editing something cool for you guys to see very soon



Another wise use of social media was when Lorde tweeted two photos of her that were taken at the same event: one was photoshopped to remove the blemishes on her face, and the other was not. With that, she bonded with and related to her fans by saying that it is “ok to have imperfections” (@lorde). Since the photos showed her performing on stage, a place of elevation, higher than everyone else, presenting her flaws brought her closer to the common world, situating her in a middle ground; in between the high and low.



CONCLUSION:

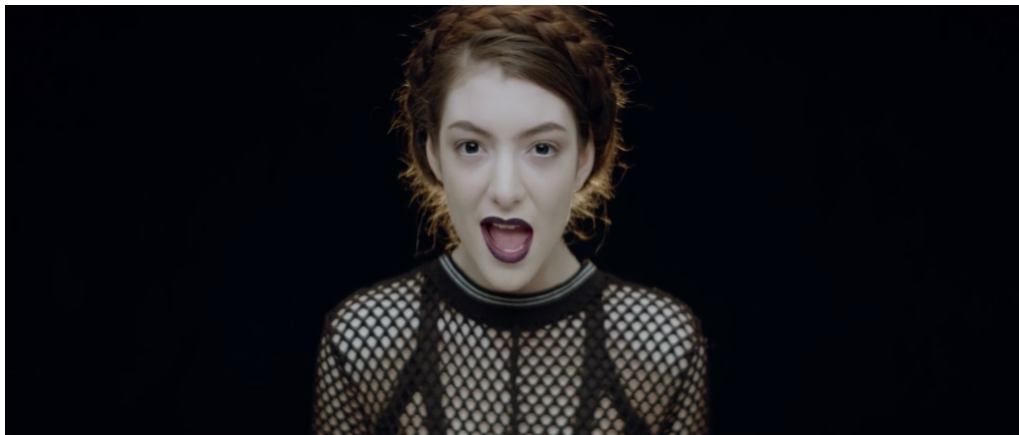
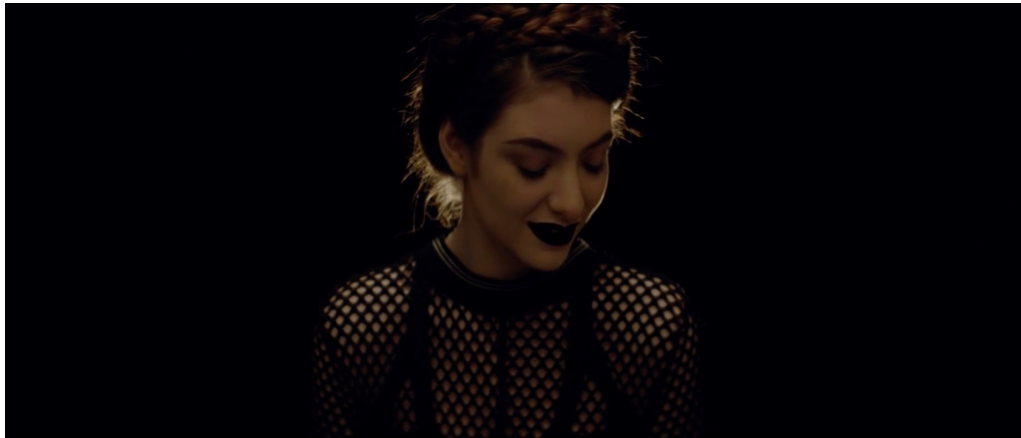
The Lorde persona pulls away from mainstream-pop conventions as she utilizes scenes from the suburbs in music videos; performs with odd twitchy movements in an industry that rewards glamour; and offers catchy and danceable songs that go against the status quo. However, she still functions within pop culture.

In an interview with Billboard, as mentioned by reporter Bethonie Butler in *The Washington Post*, Lorde said that she does not like to be in the spotlight, yet here she is

right in the center and under a very bright spotlight in the music video for “Tennis Court” (Butler). Furthering this contradiction, at the same time that she criticized the consumerist culture idolatrized in pop culture by singing “Royals” at the 2014 Grammy Awards, she was being praised by the artists that construct and support that ideology. She criticized pop culture at the biggest music ceremony in the world and (somehow) got away with it.



“Tennis Court” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8Ymd-OCucs) Music Video:



Lorde depends on pop culture to make a point about rejecting it and as a result, she exposes the cultural contradiction of the desire to go against this consumer-pop culture, but still buying a product of it, buying into the idea of rejecting mainstream pop. Lorde might have partially become one of the materialists that she criticizes, as we have seen that she functions both in the worlds of the ordinary and of the spectacular, but when one listens to her music, it still brings a feeling of relief. It still feels fresh, honest and authentic for saying something different than other pop songs. In this way, Lorde is able to make her fans feel like they are facing and confronting the contradictions of rejecting versus accepting/consuming popular culture. However, by accepting and relating to her ideas, which are conveyed through pop culture, one actually buys into just another product of it, getting stuck in a vicious cycle of never being able to set free from mainstream-pop conventions. That is ultimately the contradiction that Lorde stands for, exposes and embodies. It will be interesting to see how this changes with the arrival of her sophomore album in June 2017.

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