Lana Del Rey
Honeymoon
Interscope; 2015
By **Jessica Hopper**; September 21, 2015

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Regarding Rockism Parts Two & Three: The Progress of Poptimism and the New Rockism

January 28, 2016

Part One explored the origins and evolution of different authenticity models in American popular music criticism, breaking apart contemporary constructions into essentialist and personal models stemming, respectively, from European-American and African-American cultures. Now, in ***Parts Two and Three****, poptimism's rise to near-hegemonic acceptance is examined through the lens of Lana Del Rey and her shifting reception at Pitchfork Media. Johnson argues that despite its urgently*

necessary corrections of rockism's racialized judgments and critical biases, poptimism still falls short as an effective critical framework and alternative to rockism.

By Graham Johnson

1.1 Pitchfork and Lana Del Rey: A History of Autonomous Voice

Pitchfork Media, widely believed to have unseated Rolling Stone as music's most influential tastemaker, was acquired by Condé Nast last October (2015). A survey of headlines (TechCrunch's "Condé Nast Exec Says Acquisition Won't Change Pitchfork's Voice"; Observer Music's "Condé Nast Purchase of Pitchfork Media Sounds Death Knell for Indie Rock"), as well as a glance at the publication's official press release, immediately reveals tensions/anxiety over whether the website's sale is also "selling out." An excerpt from said press release, published October 13:

> Condé Nast believes, as we do, that Pitchfork has built an editorial voice that stands strongly alongside its others, and that the integrity of that voice — and our opinions — are fundamental to our identity... their belief in what we do, combined with their additional expertise, will allow us to extend our coverage across all platforms while remaining true to the ideals that have made Pitchfork the most trusted voice in music.

On display is a deep-seated desire to preempt charges of inauthenticity against the website, to dispel potential readership anxiety that Condé Nast's corporate money might compromise the publication's "integrity of voice." This shouldn't be surprising: Pitchfork has, since its inception, clung tightly to the identity of independent music publisher in much the same way that the artists it covers so frequently cling to their identities on independent labels. But the press release is also clearly attempting to portray the acquisition as a growing up for Pitchfork, a major milestone for a publication which was founded in late 1995 as a passion project. "This is an extraordinary moment for us," its opening paragraph begins, noting the website's transformation from unassuming beginnings into critical heavyweight. (In a similar vein, longtime contributor Nitsuh Abebe tweeted on the day of the announcement: "The first time I visited 'Pitchfork' it was just a stack of CDs in the corner of Ryan's living room, so I feel approximately 72 [sic] right now.") The central narrative arc being projected here (we assume deliberately, by Nast/Pitchfork calculated PR decisions) is of a site realizing its potential while also staying true to its "roots"; of a unique voice undergoing change but staying integrally the same.

1.2

Just under a month before news of the acquisition surfaces, Lana Del Rey releases her junior LP *Honeymoon*. The album sells 206,000 copies in its first week and garners the singer her warmest reception at Pitchfork to-date: one of the site's highest-profile reviewers, Jessica Hopper of *First Collection of Criticism by a Living...* fame, is assigned the write-up, which from its opening paragraph defends the record as "Del Rey's purest album-length expression" and her "most artistic" expression yet. *Honeymoon*, Hopper writes, "synthesizes ideas [that Del Rey has] been vamping on from the beginning," resulting in a musical "final arrival," an artistic actualization in full.

While Hopper is referring (explicitly, at least) to an artistic fulfillment of potential, the "becoming" she observes is personal as well: chart-topping pop star Lana Del Rey begins as Lizzy Grant, a largely unremarkable and unknown singer-songwriter living out of a New Jersey trailer park in the late 2000s. Her original audience, up through the release of *Born to Die*, is composed primarily of underground music communities, and it's on the indie blog circuit that the breakthrough track "Video Games" first gains traction (the grainy retro-pastiche of its accompanying video taken for the mark of an unsigned, low-budget artist). The backlash when Del Rey signs to a major label (or, more accurately, when it is discovered that she had been signed to a major all along), is the exact type of response that Pitchfork and Condé Nast will themselves fear from their acquisition deal four years later: GOOD Magazine asks of Del Rey in 2011, "Why Does Indie Music Hate Lana Del Rey?"; Pigeons and Planes poses in 2012, "Why did we all of a sudden decide to collectively stop liking Lana Del Rey?"; and Vox, in its characteristically condescending and reductive fashion, explains to the masses in 2014, "Here's Why Lana Del Rey Is So Controversial."

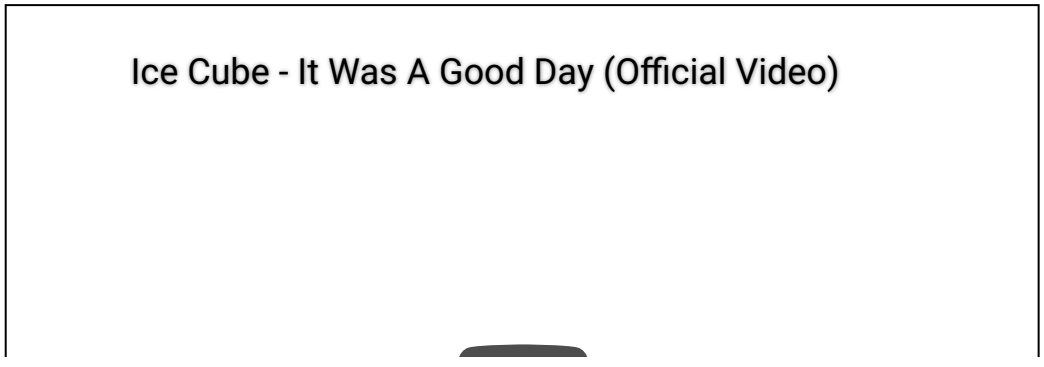
1.3

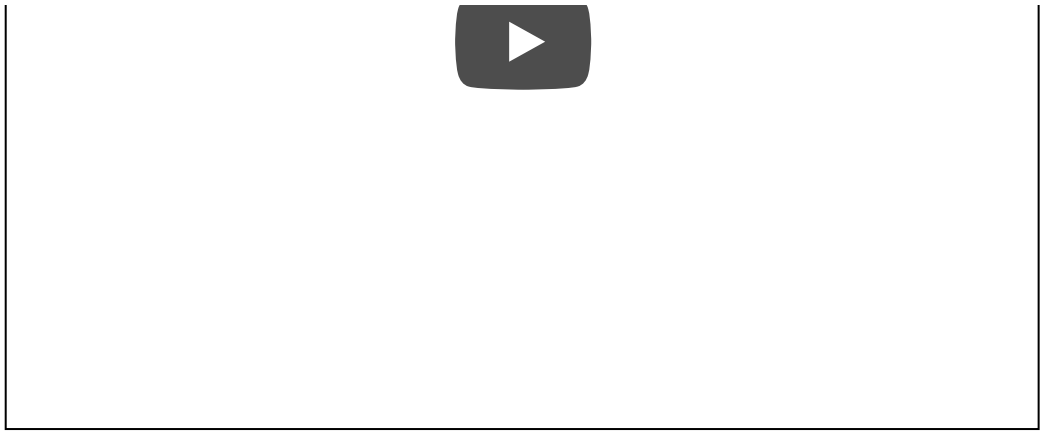
Dedicated coverage of Lana Del Rey by Pitchfork Media begins August 30, 2011 with a feature by staff writer Ryan Dombal in Pitchfork's Rising section (a column which profiles and interviews relatively new artists who are rapidly gaining blogosphere traction). What starts out as a biographical background piece maneuvers, almost inevitably, into asking the sort of questions rock music fans and critics have long been notorious for: whether Del Rey is a "character or studio creation" versus a genuine self, whether she's been tempted by the "industry" to change her "sound or look."

The rough critical framework Dombal's questions are operating out of is known as rockism, arguably the dominant mode of popular music discourse during the latter half of the 20th century. The rockist critic prioritizes sincerity over theater and rawness over polish (this being an ideological priority and its aesthetic proxy, respectively). He works off a dual-

faceted conception of authenticity as both "personal" and "essentialist," referring respectively to an artist's truthful representation of his genuine self and the natural, "primitive," "close-to-nature" quality of his culture or society (for a full background on the differences and origins of these models, see "Regarding Rockism Part One: Black Truths and Noble Savages"). Rockism is the ideology of those who "idoliz[e] the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lioniz[e] punk while barely tolerating disco; lov[e] the live show and hat[e] the music video; extol the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher." Nitsuh Abebe, in a 2011 thinkpiece for Pitchfork entitled "The Imagination of Lana Del Rey," puts it another way, arguing that in indie rock (a genre whose value judgments are heavily influenced by rockist thought), "the music itself is allowed to follow its aesthetic imagination off in strange directions, but the artists are often expected not to... When a musician tries to embody [persona and imagination] in person... fans start grumbling about being imposed upon."

Dombal's application of said rockist standards onto the work of Lana Del Rey — a musician whose performance seems so obviously predicated on falsity and persona — might seem bizarre to us in hindsight, but she plays ball anyway. She's an ex-singer-songwriter after all, a genre which Abebe notes is similarly "allergic to pretense." "There's not a real me and another me. Same person, just a different name," Del Rey responds when asked about the disparity between her stage and birth name, Lizzy Grant. Her arguments for the authenticity of her pop-star persona might not always be compelling or even make sense — she says at one point that "Elvis had good management and that's why he looks well-crafted but actually...he was always a gentleman, always a star, had a face like a god, and a voice like a dark angel. So he wasn't really contrived, he was just dead cool" — but she's making them nonetheless. That Dombal has initiated this discourse, and that she has actively engaged with it, evidences rockism's continued influence in pop music discourse as of interview date (late summer 2011) — its stubborn chemical half-life of cultural impact if you will, or as George Lipsitz writes of Ice Cube's "Good Day," an example of history's "long fetch" and tidal swell.





Perhaps most interestingly, the interaction exemplifies rockism's dual-faceted authenticity model. While Dombal's questioning primarily centers around the authenticity of "keeping it real" on a personal level (the refusal to compromise personally or artistically under commercial and/or institutional pressures), the conversation between Del Rey and Dombal additionally touches on rockist concepts of essentialized authenticity, most prominently when Dombal queries Del Rey as to whether she actively "fetishize[s] [her] trailer park lifestyle" (noting in his questioning that her father is a "successful domain investor"). While the direct query aims at sussing out whether Lana Del Rey, the artist, is a performance or "reality," the implicit question — as well as the ostensible motivation for Del Rey romanticizing a lower class living situation— hinges upon an essentialized model, in which an artist would, plausibly and profitably, project an image of poverty so as to solidify her "artistic authenticity" within the essentialist frameworks wielded inside rockism-informed independent music cultures.

1.4

Perhaps Dombal should be given some leniency for his largely-besides-the-point line of questioning, because what becomes apparent in delving through the Pitchfork archives is that 2011 is very much a transitional year for Pitchfork's critical approach.

Rockism as a critical framework has been losing ground in the critical community for some time by this point. Kelefa Sanneh's 2004 New York Times editorial, "The Rap Against Rockism," stands as an early, high-profile rallying call against it, and in the years since, a

new model called "poptimism" has begun to emerge, challenging many of rockism's assumptions and critical bedrock. It attempts to move past the (consciously and unconsciously) racialized value judgments (both in origin and practice) of rockism (that certain cultures, esp. those ethnically African, were perceived as more primitive, unsophisticated, and in-touch with nature in some uncorrupted, Rousseauian sense). Disco, that rockist bane of femininity and hedonism, undergoes serious critical re-evaluation/historical revision; with this comes the critical awareness that if past pop music was unfairly slighted, contemporary pop music is likely slighted as well, in equal or greater measure. By 2015, this paradigm shift in critical thinking will reach a feasible critical mass (Pitchfork Media, though relatively late to the game, will give high-profile coverage to pop stars like Bieber, Mac Miller, The Weeknd, and Miley Cyrus, and Editor-In-Chief Mark Richardson will confess at a Vassar College guest lecture that his staff members are "big fans" of *1989*) but in 2011 these modes are still largely in flux. Evidence of this transitional culture can, in fact, be found in Dombal's 2011 interview questions for Del Rey: he might ask about Del Rey's positioning between artistic integrity and the music industry's pressures, but he also wonders aloud, in the same sentence, whether the "two things are even [necessarily] in opposition."

Similarly, Lindsay Zoladz's review one year later of Del Rey's debut LP *Born to Die* notes that while the "grainy homemade" quality of Del Rey's breakthrough "Video Games" had previously "brought to mind... the indie sphere" (and thus the artistic, non-corporate authenticity of said sphere), *Born to Die* exemplifies an artist securely within the realm of "big-budget chart pop." Not only are these two spheres presented as dissonant and even antagonistic, but Zoladz's language implies a sort of betrayal of listeners by Del Rey: they were promised one thing with her early releases but received something else, something potentially lesser despite (or because of) its "big budget." The end result of this corporate tampering is that *Born to Die* sounds "out of touch... not just with the world around it, but with the simple business of human emotion." Her language shows a clear failing of the album by rockist standards — of underground or lower-class artists channeling a human rawness or "in-touchness" that Del Rey, with her corporate patronage, fails to achieve. It's the "album equivalent," Zoladz writes, "of a faked orgasm," a metaphor which, of course, further channels the language of deceit and betrayal while emphasizing discrepancies between presentation and "fact." And yet, there's some reconciliation or compromise of these ideals on Zoladz's part: she acknowledges that (quoting Ellen Willis), "'Blatant artifice can, in the right circumstances, be poignantly honest'" — but only if it meets certain standards and specific criteria by which this achieved, finally concluding that *Born to Die*

lacks the self-aware "tension between image and inner self" to give it emotional "fire." The tension and conflict Zoladz herself feels in attempting to reconcile the artistic worths of theatrical and confessional expression parallels the greater music community's own inner turmoil, grappling for handholds within the crawlspace between rockist and poptimist frameworks.

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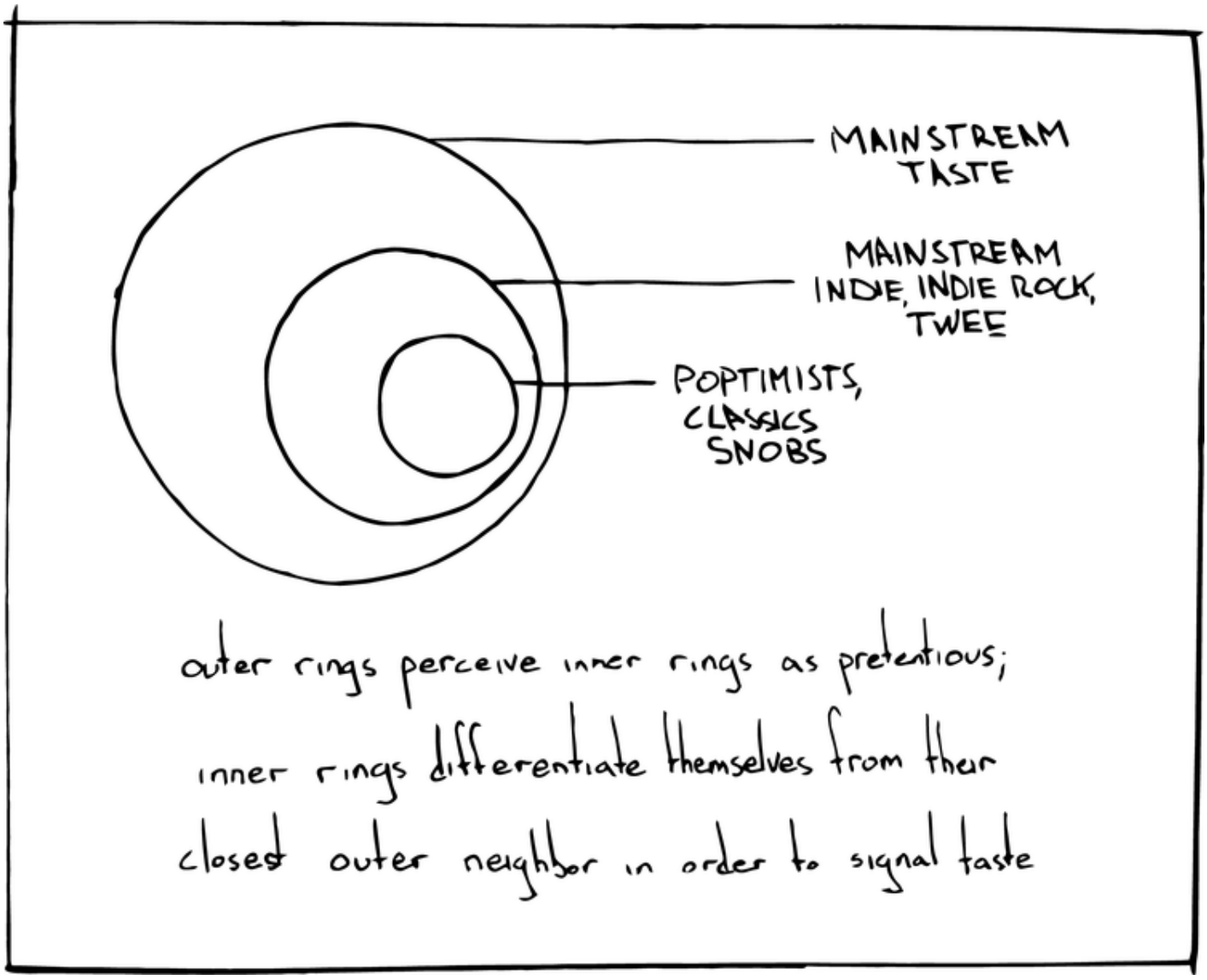

Illustration by Jeevan Farias & G. Johnson for Rare Candy.

2.1 Pitchfork and Poptimism in the Present Day

By 2016, not only has Pitchfork "gone mainstream" with its acquisition deal, it's also started covering chart-topping, commercial behemoths of pop — and not just covering, but frequently praising under poptimist evaluatory approaches. Rockism has been largely discarded, along with (hopefully) most of its racial baggage and critical shortcomings — but have we thrown out the baby with the bathwater? Is it possible that while rockism's approach to assessing authenticity is clearly misguided, its interest in authenticity as an evaluative tool might not be; in other words, that rockism's problems reside not in its high valuation of authenticity but in its method of determining and scoring said authenticity? In automotive and plumbing repairs, artificial smoke is blown through piping in order to test for leaks. Rockist ideas (and ideals) of musical and artistic authenticity are still far too close to the public consciousness (hence the success of amateur acoustic covers of pop songs, and the success of bands like Mumford & Sons or Imagine Dragons) to vet properly rockist authenticity claims, but perhaps, to follow the metaphor, we can test the steadfastness of rockists' ideas about authenticity by changing the color of the gas to a more conspicuous and less culturally-familiar hue (a loose sort of defamiliarization a la Shklovsky) in order to locate leakages.

E.G.: how do Pitchfork's rockist conceptions of authenticity hold up when applied reflexively, not upon a creative-outlet but a critical one — Pitchfork itself? It should not be too much of a stretch — the line between criticism and creativity has always been blurry. Criticism is very much a catalyst and creator of culture via the approaches and aesthetic choices it promotes; moreover, critical writing itself is as much a creative endeavour as it is an analytical one, requiring the writer to himself make aesthetic choices and settle on a single guiding approach out of many. Both a critical outlet and creative outlet both face the kinds of public pressures that are seen to lead to "compromised" or "inauthentic" expression (commercial, academic, popular, reputational, personal). Criticism has perhaps only escaped its own brand of analysis because it is so set in its role as judge, interpreter, and aggressor. So do the types of questions asked by Dombal and Zoladz of Del Rey make sense, or seem legitimate, when asked about Pitchfork itself as a critical/creative outlet?

The shift at Pitchfork between rockist and poptimist critical frameworks provides an interesting "in" to answering this question: Shifts logically imply a multitude of different critical identities, separated temporally over the course of said transition, which comprise Pitchfork's identities as a rockist critical outlet, as a poptimist critical outlet, and any points in the spectrum between. To flip Dombal's question (re: Lizzy Grant vs. Lana Del Rey) back onto Pitchfork: is it useful to ask which of the many identities is Pitchfork's "real self" vs performance? A priori, at least, it seems possible that all of the following are true: that some

of the identities are more contrived and others relatively more "real"; that all of them are equally performance; that all of them are very "real" manifestations of an open-minded, flexible critical outlet. Moreover, as Dombal entertains with Grant, perhaps the latter two qualities are not even necessarily in opposition.

Set aside, perhaps indefinitely, this last possibility: it implies that performance, artificiality, deceit, falsehood, the compromising of belief for financial gain, the compromising of art for popularity, are all part of human nature and the "real" interests of the artist and therefore as "authentic" as an instinct towards bared expression and honesty. While strictly speaking this is true, it makes authenticity an instrumentally worthless term since all actions are equally "in one's nature" and inauthenticity therefore made an impossibility. When people use the phrase "authenticity" critically or casually however, they're typically equating the term with transparency towards the audience (a lack of veil / absence of deception): if an artist is relating a certain experience, we want to know that she's conveying an emotional truth about herself, being vulnerable or expressive in her communication, and informing rather than manipulating us. It makes sense evolutionarily: there's a reason that pulling the hood over someone's head is a breach of social conduct in almost any form of communication we practice — it's dangerous for us to not know someone else's (esp. a competitor's) "true self" or "true motives."

To investigate whether Pitchfork's shift towards poptimism fits with these concepts of authenticity: There are likely ideological reasons for why Pitchfork is transitioning away from a rockist standpoint, and these ideological reasons are likely legitimate. They might include, but are not limited to: rockism's history of buying into ethically-iffy/racially-colored judgments, its tendency to dismiss the power of theater as a legitimate force in expression and artistry, or its tendency towards *High Fidelity*-brand elitism, frowning upon "lamestreamers"/mainstream culture while fetishizing obscurity and crate digging in a way that is arguably exclusionary and/or undemocratic. But there are also plenty of non-ideological reasons that might factor into this shift as well, reasons like identity signaling and commercial power. It might hypothetically be an "uncompromised" or intellectually "authentic" stance to take seriously Lana Del Rey's most recent release in a front-page review, but it'll also garner the search-engine-optimized Pitchfork a top-of-the-page result for one of the most popular albums of 2015, generating more ad revenue via page clicks (by orders of magnitude) than a review of a minor indie rock LP ever could. Of course, there are plenty of hold-overs and purists from the rockist tradition who make up Pitchfork's readership and who might abandon the publication in light of these reviews. Like Del Rey at the start of her career, Pitchfork faces a financial straddling act between the worlds of

mainstream and underground, of poptimist and rockist cultures — whether they choose to "compromise" their coverage's "integrity" to accommodate it or not. That straddling act is possibly what leads to reviews on the website both acknowledging Del Rey's production and simultaneously preempting rockist outrage: from Zoladz's *Born to Die* write-up, she notes that the "album's impressively lush atmosphere might be the one thing that will unite its detractors and apologists," without actually defending the production's artistic merits. Richardson's 2014 *Ultraviolence* review, meanwhile, asserts of the album that "whether or not [the listener] wants to take this particular [musical] ride will largely depend on how much stock [he puts] in 'authenticity'" — tacitly acknowledging the constructed nature of authenticity via scare quotes while hedging around any definitive stance as to the actual value of authenticity as an evaluative tool.

Setting aside the temptingly lucrative ad revenue that major release coverage brings, it's also worth pointing out that at a more qualitative level than quantitative, poptimism's cultural progressive connotations are bestowed in part upon any publication which utilizes it. The wielding of "poptimist thought" or framework, with its critical theory background and vaguely leftist/liberal positions (seeing poptimism as a correction to years of music industry sexism against female pop stars; attempting to correct for the racially-stained rockist attacks against disco in the 1970s) works on multiple levels for Pitchfork: again, the website's shift away from rockist criticism may be out of "genuine" enlightenment or shifted critical outlook, but it's incredibly convenient for the publication's pockets as well: a social justice-tinged, activist, youth readership currently holds significant sway over Internet readership and interaction, and by aligning itself with this population of Internet users via progressive critical thought (as the website has also done by beginning to publish frequent editorials on sexism, racism, ableism, and appropriation in the music industry), Pitchfork likely hopes to stay relevant with young demographics in a way Rolling Stone potentially will not (see also the spate of recent highly politicized, social justice-culture op-eds published by Pitchfork, whose controversy and content ensure them far higher ratings than previous columns on sound production and cultural criticism ever did). More evidence of this commercial value can be found in Condé Nast's language when discussing their purchase of Pitchfork Media, a representative from the corp. telling the press that one of their primary motivations for the acquisition was the millennial audience the website brought with it.

(And then of course, beyond the power of poptimist frameworks to signal ethical and political progressivism, there's its power to signal the same kind of artistic and cultural enlightenment that rockism once did: Zoladz herself, in an open letter on Vulture/New York

Magazine introducing herself as the publication's new head music editor, writes: "I've recently started to suspect that bragging about cultural omnivorousness has become its own form of snobbery, and that the new face of music-nerd elitism is not the High Fidelity bro but instead the Twitter user who would very much like you to applaud him for listening to Ke$ha and Sunn O))) and Florida Georgia Line and Gucci Mane." New York Times critic Saul Austerlitz, meanwhile, notes in "The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism" that "contemporary music criticism is a minefield rife with nasty, ad hominem attacks," and laments that the "most popular target, in recent years, has been those professing inadequate fealty to pop." Pitchfork staff writers may be genuine believers in the power of pop music, but they're also able to claim cultural and ethical enlightenment by defending someone like Lana Del Rey).

If all this "defamiliarization" — and again, I use this phrase loosely, referring to the practice of making the familiar strange as a mode of critical understanding, eg imposing authenticity questions typically foisted on LPs onto critical inquiry itself — if this defamiliarization worked at all, it likely muddied the waters rather than clearing them. On one hand, if the concepts of authenticity as practiced by music critics don't even hold up to their own standards as a authentic, then the entire system might intuitively seem, for lack of a better phrase, suspiciously bullshitty. Moreover, a substantial degree of hypocrisy seems evident in Pitchfork's authenticity judgments, dealt out by a commercial heavyweight which almost certainly compromises its coverage for greater readership and ad revenue (among a spate of other, previously discussed, non-artistic/non-critical incentives). But hypocrisy does not necessarily mean their position is wrong (see *tuo quoque* logical fallacies) and *a priori* at least it is easy to imagine a case in which, as rockism and its descendants allege, corporate money or commercial interests come at the cost of (or, essentially, compromise) other artistic ends like innovativeness or beauty. And the argument that almost all creative/critical outlets compromise their output, to some degree, for commercial reasons (eg click counts, cultural relevancy, and social status serving as contributing incentives to Pitchfork's poptimist shift), doesn't discount refute this — it only emphasizes the gradient, rather than binary, quality of authenticity, compromise, and "keeping it real" in a rockist understanding.

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3.1 Poptimism as Post-Critical Thought

My reading of Pitchfork's coverage strategies and evaluative approaches has thus far been distinctly ungenerous, an issue only compounded by an obvious dearth of evidence which necessitates guesswork; I hope, at the very least, that this comes off more as speculative consideration than presumptuous psychological analysis. There are no leaked emails here,

no smoking guns revealing Pitchfork's insidious motives. I'm primarily concerned with whether and why it might matter that Pitchfork's gradual adoption of poptimism was (in part or in theory) pragmatically and financially motivated — not in conjecturing as to whether that is, in fact, the case. As for the issue of infant and tub:

When Zoladz laments the cult of loving equally "Ke$ha and Sunn O))) and Florida Georgia Line and Gucci Mane," we don't assume that this John-Doe-Poptimist believes Ke$ha is communicating with her audience in an honest, unmediated, and transparent way (though pop-stars who do veer towards self-awareness and ironically reclaimed artificiality usually win props for at least the latter quality). Nor does he believe that her artistic intention/communication/concept, as specifically (rather than ambiguously) envisioned, emerged uncompromised from the corporate process; he may be ideologically flawed but he is not completely oblivious to the facts of pop music's commercialization. Instead, he's taking the exact approach Sanneh advocates in "Rap Against Rockism":

> You can argue that the shape-shifting feminist hip-pop of Ms. Aguilera is every bit as radical as the punk rock of the 1970's (and it is), but then you haven't challenged any of the old rockist questions (starting with: Who's more radical?), you've just scribbled in some new answers.
>
> The challenge isn't merely to replace the old list of Great Rock Albums with a new list of Great Pop Songs — although that would, at the very least, be a nice change of pace. It's to find a way to think about a fluid musical world where it's impossible to separate classics from guilty pleasures.

It's in these lines, oracular more than observational, that Sanneh best frames poptimism and what it's trying to achieve. It's also the step in which the distinction between baby and bathwater is identified — and then promptly ignored.

Poptimism, as conceived of above, isn't just the shedding of aesthetic prejudices (bathwater) — it's about the shedding of almost any critical discernment whatsoever, potentially under the justification of radicalism for radicalism's sake alone. Poptimism is in some ways the decade-or-two-behind-popular-music equivalent of visual art's post-critical era. It hasn't expanded its vision to understand that a disco or pop act can be as radical than a hardcore band, as innovative as an art rocker, as personally expressive and culturally urgent as punk. To the contrary, it's a collective critical shrug, a boredom with, apathy towards, or complete dismissal of radicalism, innovation, expression, and cultural worth — performed in favor of personal taste and experienced enjoyment as the ultimate mode of appraisal. When guilty

pleasures and Great Works are valued in the same way, then it must be that only their shared qualities — their lowest common denominators — are being evaluated for. With poptimism, this quality is a listener's pleasure, erase the "guilty." Taste is a matter of taste, according to its philosophy, and the quality of a work is based on the quantity of dopamine released when the listener interacts with it (hold off temporarily on the obvious pro-criticism rebuttal: that a listener's interaction and experience with a piece of music is not pre-ordained but largely the result of contextual understanding and framing, ie the exact things provided by a critic).

Challenging post-critical culture and mentality is a Herculean task in itself, one I can't hope to accomplish here, but I hope at least to be convincing in arguing poptimism's identity as post-critical rather than progressive; as revolutionary rather than reformist and perhaps for the worse. I will, however, offer just two brief examples of how artistic qualities beyond immediate, experienced enjoyment can matter immensely, even granting poptimism's post-critical position that enjoyment and pleasure are, in fact, culture's most important end:

3.1.1

(a) Innovation and aesthetic radicalism prevent the stagnation of culture, and therefore minimize repetitive, boring, *unpleasurable* output. Here, artistic innovation creates contextually more enjoyable art: within sameness, novelty is cognitively more stimulating. (b) Innovation and radicalism vet a plethora of different aesthetic experiences, some of which will be inherently, due to brain wiring/neural processing, more "pleasurable" than existing aesthetic experiences.

3.1.2

(a) Personal expression via art, when honest and vulnerable, can expand a listener's circle of empathy and facilitate improved interpersonal relations, social cooperation (as a macro process, culture featuring this quality can have real, macro-level effects). (b) Personal expression via art, when honest and vulnerable, can facilitate artist-audience solidarity, easing individual isolation and self-loathing.

3.2

I believe in criticism. I believe that the context criticism provides, its dual roles of understanding (receptive/passive) and shaping (active via interpretation, publication) culture, is not only essential for a vibrant, vital artistic tradition but inseparable from the very definition of art itself.

Though the post-critical poptimism is no choice at all, rockism is indisputably flawed as well, too flawed to return to with its racially-tinged prejudices and bizarre, often contradictory fetishizations. Arguably optimal: relentlessly stripping rockism of its (significant) critical embarrassments while fostering what I would argue is rockism's most central force: its belief in an art and culture which transcend the ordinary — something impossible in a post-critical perspective where each ordinary object is seen as equally transcendent. The new rockism would hold this transcendent possibility close to its heart, fashioning itself as a critical approach dedicated to (I) understanding (receptive/passive) which works hold this possibility and why, and (II) fostering a culture receptive to, and fecund in yielding, said transcendent works. It would understand that aesthetic variations are more trappings than horse or harness; as a reflection it would occupy some middle ground between poptimism and rockism, where aesthetic taste is democratic and appraisal open-minded, but ideological qualities are held as more sacred (though not precluded from being challenged) dominants.

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4.1 The Need for a New Criticism

The Old Rockism was sloppy. Because it can be so hard to determine things like emotional honesty, rockist criticism sought aesthetic proxies for its ideological stance — and this turned out to be, perhaps, the greatest weakness of rockism's authenticity judgments. If rockists believed that the primitive and poor peoples of the world were more in touch with the world and with themselves, then music that was acoustic, low-fidelity, and gravelly-voiced (the aesthetic trappings and signifiers of primitivism and poverty) was deemed good on ideological grounds. Obviously, the base premise here is flawed, a Rousseauian fetishization of non-Western, non-upper

Image (mostly satirical) by Jeevan Farias and G. Johnson

class populations, but ignoring (for the sake of this essay's scope) the validity of this premise, the proxy is *instrumentally problematic* as well. Prioritizing emotional "truth" as a characteristic of good art seems potentially legitimate, but using aesthetic proxies for this ideological stance ends up leading to things like the fetishization of lo-fi recording in 2015/16, when your average, starving DIY musician (stalwart and steadfast, no doubt, in his impassioned resistance of corporate money and its tendency to compromise his emotional "truth") can make much higher-fidelity cuts. Lo-fi isn't honesty; it's deception, an illusion which checks off the boxes for whichever aesthetic proxy rockism has ingrained in our critical approach. Ideological proxies are part of why electronic music is still seen as a lesser, emptier form of artistic expression than guitar music by some die-hard rockists...

...the aesthetic trappings and sonics of electronic music are closer to commercialized pop and EDM than they are rockist-conforming genres like the blues. Ideologically, it doesn't make a scrap of sense for a rockist prioritizing "emotional truth and expressiveness" to label a big-time band like Zeppelin more "authentic" than a bedroom UK-garage producer, and yet this happens all the time — due to a failing of aesthetic proxies.

First set of assertions: That while rockism correctly observes that populist interests can compromise artistic values, it fails to acknowledge that all artistic decisions are between a host of options, and that the act of choosing is necessarily a compromise of one value for another. (These compromises are perhaps better understood as a reflection of the artist's hierarchy of values; typically, accusations of "inauthenticity" emerge when the accuser's hierarchy does not align with the artist's.) A prioritization of populist appeal will almost certainly come at the cost of innovation — it's incredibly difficult if not inherently

impossible to be both paradigm-shattering and easily accessible at once, so typically different artists with different artistic hierarchies of value will choose to pursue one quality or the other. The avant-garde (in the lower-case sense of the term as experimental practice, rather than its upper-class connotation as established, highbrow genre) is composed of those whose value hierarchies prioritize the quality of being "groundbreaking" or "progressive"; a conventional popular music scene usually meddles in more established styles and chooses instead to prioritize things like beauty and entertainment.

Second set of assertions: While rockism correctly observes that commercial temptations can compromise artistic value, it fails to recognize that the two qualities are neither wholly separate nor antithetical. If an artist supports a model of art which prioritizes entertainment factor over innovation, the temptation of commercial success (wanting to be accepted or liked by a large amount of mainstream/commercial listeners) isn't really a compromise of approach. Moreover, a quasi-poptimist critic prioritizing beauty and mass appeal in his values hierarchy would likely see institutionalized art-world pressure as a "temptation towards compromise" — via its network of connections, its weighty influence in critical circles, and the kind of prestige that accompanies academic and/or highbrow acceptance — in the same way that the Old Rockist critic sees corporate money. Moreover, even if "awe" is held above entertainment factor in an artist's hierarchy, if achieving this awe involves lush, expensive production, a major record label deal can ensure that this awe is actualized; Old Rockist notions of money's inherently detrimental, compromising effect on art can seem absurd when one realizes that Lana Del Rey, and acts like her, when relegated to the underground might have had to compromise her artistic vision due to a *lack*, rather than presence, of corporate interest.

(Pitchfork, for example, isn't going to start putting out "worse" content because they've been acquired by Nast [they claim their editorial decisions will remain entirely independent, though I'd imagine the effects of the acquisition will be less a question of "whether" and more one of degree] — they'll just likely put out content which prioritizes, more so than previously, mass appeal. This might mean less divisive, polemic content, which would simply be continuing a long-term trend — as Pitchfork has gained a wider readership, there's been a pretty clear toning down of previous antics, like the infamous Jet review consisting solely of videotaped monkey excreting urine into its own mouth. On one hand, this can seem understandably problematic, a compromising of editorial and authorial autonomy to appease a wider public for commercial ends. But wasn't the reckless, autonomous, controversial criticism that Pitchfork once practiced the very quality made the publication infamous in the first place? Isn't there an argument to be made that their

authorial voice of stick-it-to-the-man rebellion was as much tailored to a specific underground audience as Pitchfork's current, more populist stance is? Even disregarding such questions, it doesn't seem to me obvious that Pitchfork's older, borderline-bullying approach was a better state of affairs than their contemporary coverage, merely because it refused to "bow" to social expectations of decency.)

4.2

Good criticism then, seems to require an acknowledgment of personal preferences concerning the hierarchy of values in art — the subjective ordering and prioritizing of qualities like beauty, innovation, and entertainment value as important to art — any values, really, so long as they exist and are philosophically backed — and consists of ideologically based, rather than aesthetically based, investigations as to whether this hierarchy is mirrored in a given work of art (or, better yet, whether the work deliberately and knowingly challenges existing hierarchies). Only then, by moving beyond the vagueness of phrases like authenticity, can the critic fully examine the ways conflicting pressures skew and compromise artistic priorities in a way detrimental to the culture and tradition, beginning by acknowledging that such pressures include far more than simply commercial forces. Perhaps Zoladz, in summoning Ellen Willis, channels this possibility best: a self-proclaimed indie rock champion, Zoladz outlines explicitly in her *Born to Die* review her critical priorities of honesty, tension, and solidarity — before noting how a pop star like Del Rey ignores these aims for an alternate set of artistic priorities like slick commercial production and accessibility. Of course as well, there's the question of Del Rey's degree of intentionality, and whether it even matters... ⓡⓒ

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