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Welcome to the World of the Plastic Beach: Gorillaz and the Future

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Welcome to the World of the Plastic Beach: Gorillaz and the Future

Michael Larson

“It’s all good news now, because we left the taps
running for a hundred years.”
– Gorillaz “Pirate Jet”

- 1 Gorillaz is the name of the musical and multi-media artistic collaboration between the primary masterminds Damon Albarn, who is in charge of the music, and cartoonist Jamie Hewlett, who designs the group’s artwork. The collaboration started around 1998 and the dawning of the new millennium plays a major role in the themes and aesthetics of the group’s early work.
- 2 The public faces of Gorillaz are the 4 cartoon characters that comprise the virtual band : Murdoc Niccals (bass), 2D (lead vocals/keyboards), Noodle (guitar) and Russel Hobbs (percussion). Murdoc is the self-professed leader of this group, with a self-aggrandizing attitude and debauched lifestyle. He shows a number of serpent-like features in his green skin tone and physique (including a long, forked tongue). These features may possibly be due to years of rock and roll excess or from having sold his soul to Satan, as he attests to have done (in a deal to make Gorillaz the biggest band in the world). The rest of the group is comprised by a band of misfits, each with his or her own unique musical proclivity. The obvious character flaws and bizarre peculiarities of the band members are worth considering in regards to the Gorillaz version of utopianism. The alternate version of reality these characters inhabit is not your usual escapist fantasy.
- 3 The characters are not idealized heroic figures, by any stretch of the imagination. They are a band of misfits living on the margins. Russel has had bouts of being possessed by spirits and has moved in and out of cultish philosophies. Noodle is a teenaged girl, apparently without family. 2D is generally shown as lacking in confidence (particularly in Murdoc’s presence) and Murdoc is an excessively debauched, aging rock-star.
- 4 The themes dealt with in Gorillaz have continually revolved around the question of the future. The first phase of Gorillaz coincides with the turn of the millennium, which

signaled the end of one era and the dawning of what was to have been “the future.” For many who had grown up in the latter half of the twentieth-century, the new century was the time when industrial progress and technology were to have produced an awe-inspiring world of advances for the human race, with peace and wealth for all. But having arrived, we find ourselves faced with growing environmental devastation, ongoing wars, disease, famines, vast economic inequality, and expanding ghost towns. The debut album : *Gorillaz*, without directly invoking much in the way of global issues, stands as a reflection on the mood of life at the end of the modern era.

Phase One : Millennial Tension

- 5 There are several thematic cues in both the music and artwork which invoke an arrival in “the future,” but we find that the time which has arrived is far darker than what had been promised. Consider the following lyrics : “I’ll pay, when...tomorrow comes today.” And more famously, “I’m useless, but not for long, the future is coming on.” These lyrics come from the album’s first two singles, each suggesting that “the future” is imminent, but also connoting an ambivalence which pervades the record. What sort of future is arriving ? Is it a point of closure or a moment of reckoning ? Or may it yet be an opening of new possibilities ? Perhaps by hammering the nails in the coffin of those false dreams of a world of wealth and ease for all, we might find ourselves free to imagine other paths.
- 6 While much of the music, lyrics and artwork are very dark, the performers are having fun, even when playing with some very dark themes. See for example the collaboration with Cuban legend Ibrahim Ferrer (of *Buena Vista Social Club* fame) entitled “Latin Simone.” This song plays with the notion of going mad and running through suicidal thoughts, but the delivery suggests dark humor in repeatedly asking “¿Qué Pasa contigo ?” though the reflection is really aimed at oneself. (“What’s the matter with me ?” is sung by Albarn in the English language version.) Ferrer’s vocal delivery is playful and exuberant, as if laughing in the face of darkness outside and even at one’s own demons.
- 7 The pursuit of finding joy and feelings to hold on to in the midst of darkness will continue to present itself as a struggle in the heart of each of the first three Gorillaz albums. Even if we do find ourselves approaching a reckoning of end-times proportions, we must try and appreciate what is worth saving ; experiencing our humanity. Without that, we may lose track of what is worth fighting for.
- 8 The future is in question at the dawn of the millennium. As we find ourselves and our planet ever more precariously exposed to risks of environmental devastation and economic collapse, can we re-envision our situation as one of possibilities ? Can we find a way to move forward ? Melancholic resignation in the face of our broken dreams and anxiety in the face of our exposure to impossible risks, both of these seem like reasonable reactions.

Phase Two : End Times

- 9 “The Dark is rising, there is a day of reckoning coming and maybe the harvest is almost upon us!!”¹ - A warning posted in an advance promotional booklet for *Demon Days*.

- 10 Damon Albarn was very publicly involved in the massive 2003 anti-war protests around London. The experience of witnessing the masses of sentiment expressed against the war, and its dismissal by the powers that be, plays into the themes explored on the next Gorillaz album.
- 11 Released in 2005, *Demon Days* offers a much more focused reflection on the themes of darkness and reckoning hinted at in the first album cycle. After a prelude which references the film *Dawn of the Dead*, the album's first proper track poses the question: "Are we the last living souls?" While soon after, Albarn implores: "O green world, don't desert me now." The destruction of nature weighs heavily in the album's end-times aesthetic. But it is not only environmental concerns that are reflected. Faced with war and the threat of perpetual wars, many of the songs reflect directly upon the increasing atmosphere of hatred and fear being deployed in order to manipulate the masses and to justify new military invasions with increasing xenophobia. However, the sentiments of hope and love, which can also be felt in the outpouring of protest against the war, also resonate in the album's lyrics.
- 12 "Dirty Harry" provides a reflection on the "war on terror." Guest rapper Bootie Brown delivers his lyrics from the perspective of a soldier who starts from a position of acting without asking questions, full of confidence and bravado. But he comes to feel guilt and begins to confront the lies and hypocrisy which have sent him into battle, as the following lines indicate: "The cost of life seems to get cheaper... The war is over, so said the speaker. / with a flight suit on / maybe to him I'm just a pawn / so he can advance. I remember when we used to dance. All I wanna do is dance."
- 13 The turn to remembering happiness, joy and connectedness pulls the song's protagonist away from the despair of being mired in an effort of destruction and deceit. The song encapsulates the struggle that runs throughout the Gorillaz' work, of the internal struggle between the forces of negativity that drag us down and the feelings of joy and connection that we cling to in order to make it out. But the setting for these reflections is always rooted in the darkness and decay that we must reckon with.
- 14 During the *Demon Days* album cycle, the band's website operates as the setting for a side-story to unfold for the album. The website allows visitors to move about the cartoon band's home and recording studio, Kong Studios, encountering surprises and stumbling into a series of bizarre games. Over the course of about two years, however, the studio becomes ever more surrounded by a growing landfill. It becomes increasingly dilapidated with whole rooms falling apart. Finally the entire studio is gone, having burned to the ground (possibly by Murdoc, to collect insurance money, though this is uncertain).
- 15 Prior to the final destruction of the studios, seen floating above the decaying Kong and its surrounding landfill was the windmill-propelled island, as mentioned in the lyrics of the single "Feel Good Inc." The island is pleasant looking, with bright trees and grass growing as it floats in a clear, bright sky with white fluffy clouds. The windmill island seems to work as a relic of purity and, perhaps, naïve happiness. It may be a symbol of love, joy and hope as it sits above the hatred and destruction on earth. But the island finds itself in a very precarious position, anchored to this decaying world. Indeed, the final video for the album cycle, "El Mañana," shows the island in flight, with Noodle on board happily strumming her guitar, whence she and the island get chased and fired

upon by black military helicopters. The video concludes with the island, and Noodle, plummeting from the sky to their apparent demise.

- 16 Another song on the record, “Fire Coming Out of the Monkey’s Head” (recited by actor Dennis Hopper), tells an allegory of a peaceful society of blind people (“the happy folk”) that becomes defiled by the plundering of shadowy foreigners who desire the earth’s jewels and seek to extract them without concern for the well-being of the land. In their plunder, the invaders awaken the dormant spirit within “the mountain called monkey.” In the end, we are told that “The mountain called Monkey had spoken. There was only fire, and then... nothing.” It seems that the sense of imminent reckoning signaled in certain lyrics from the first album has reached a conclusion. Hope has been lost to the forces of darkness.
- 17 With both the depiction of the island and the tale of the happy folk, we witness these pure depictions of innocence destroyed. The conclusion would seem that we have come upon the brink of destruction, without hope.
- 18 The London Community Gospel Choir sings in the album’s closing track about it being “hard for a good soul to survive” as we find ourselves unable to trust the air we breathe and lies become reality. But, the Gorillaz aren’t exactly “good souls,” and they will indeed re-emerge, rising like a phoenix out of the ashes, or as Murdoc puts it : “Out of the ashes of Kong Studios, *Plastic Beach* rose like a big dirty swan.”²

Phase III : The Overload

- 19 “Kids gather ‘round, yeah I need your focus. I know it seems like the world is so hopeless. It’s like wonderland.” – Snoop Dogg on “Welcome to the World of the Plastic Beach”
- 20 The band moves to “point Nemo,” the most remote part of the world’s oceans where Murdoc notices in the distance an island that seems quite beautiful, but on closer inspection turns out to be a massive collection of garbage. The promotional videos made for the album, with a real island model constructed and shot in film, plays on this dynamic. The band work to construct something vibrant and beautiful out of this would-be mass of garbage. Snoop Dogg’s lyrics cited above are from the album’s first vocal track. They illuminate the project of making a utopia out of the very debris and decay that breeds our hopelessness. This dynamic relates to the aesthetic that Evan Calder Williams dubs a “salvagepunk” ethos. Williams writes : “We don’t believe that ‘another world is possible,’ because we know that things superseded still stick around and stink, unwelcome remainders with which we have to deal. Another world is necessary, but only built from the gutted hull of this one.”³ Ultimately the “escape” to a plastic beach is anything but escapist. The journey to the farthest reaches of our world brings us face to face with the reality we have been trying to externalize for far too long. Yet, rather than crumbling at the sight or marveling at the awful its beauty, we are called to stir our imagination and vital desires in a critical engagement with this landscape.
- 21 The theme of the album was imagined by Albarn while strolling along a beach in England, noticing how much plastic was mixed in with the sand, at first indistinguishable. The theme expanded to incorporate reference to the gigantic gyres of plastic which have accumulated as artificial landmasses in most of our world’s

oceans. Generally far away from inhabited areas, these horrifyingly expansive territories could easily be ignored by most of us : out of sight, out of mind. Gorillaz call us to account for, in some way, the reality of this mess our industries have long thought they could “externalize.” But what we are reminded of is that there is nowhere else for it all, or us, to go.

- 22 Slavoj Žižek considers that “the true ecologist” loves the world as it is. He relates to what he considers true love for another person, in which if one loves another it is not a matter of idealizing them, but of being able to look at all of their “failures, stupidities, ugly points, and, nonetheless the person is absolute for you... You see perfection in imperfection itself, and that’s how we should learn to love the world.”⁴ Žižek advocates the need to find a poetic dimension in imperfection, in our mistakes, in our rubbish, and we must cease to mythologize the purity of nature. We must learn to love the garish, to love our trash, as it too is part of our world, part of our reality.
- 23 Adrian Johnston writes that for Jacques Lacan, “the condemnation of status quo reality that goes hand-in-hand with the desire for utopia condemns a situation with which the utopian is fully complicit, despite his or her tendency to refuse to recognize and acknowledge this complicity.”⁵ But with *Plastic Beach*, Gorillaz invert this notion, delving instead further into the ugly points of contemporary reality and reflecting specifically upon our own involvement in the creation and perpetuation of the status quo reality. It is more about overcoming the splitting of our narratives and the externalization of responsibility, to obtain a fuller picture of our world and the possibilities it may yet present for us.
- 24 *Plastic Beach* presents a portrait of a world withered by decay, over-consumption and disregard. Yet in the face of global catastrophes and the enormous failures of modern progress, it neither insists upon an exodus to purity nor does it offer pithy appeals for guilt and repentance. Though melancholy plays a large part in the album’s reflections, there is no sense of languishing in despair. Instead, by constructing a dystopian landscape and a lyrical reflection on the meanings of this warping of the natural and artificial, *Plastic Beach* emerges as a stage for the imagination of new creations and possibilities.
- 25 The album’s first single, “Stylo,” is a collaborative effort of Albarn, Mos Def and Bobby Womack. The lyrics intersect concern about reaching the point of “overload” on our planet, while Womack reflects on the personal difficulty of making it through the week. But it is the “electric” force of love, which is urgently called for to fight through this mess. In brilliant concise form, the track oscillates through the key areas of thematic concern, between the personal and the global, love and despair. In an interview, Gorillaz’ character Murdoc states that “With “Stylo,” I wanted the music to feel euphoric, whilst still putting across how precarious our tightly packed situation is now worldwide, where we’re at as a species on this overpopulated planet... coming on to the overload...”⁶ *Plastic Beach* strives to seek out beauty in decay, persisting in the midst of all the rubbish left in the wake of progress.
- 26 The closing track on the album repeats the chorus : “It’s all good news now, because we left the taps running for a hundred years.” “Pirate Jet” thus plays directly into the complex ambivalence which the whole album is working through. The reference could suggest that things are too late and the damage has been done, but instead is delivered with an ironic (though sincere) optimism. Ultimately, it has to be our capacity for love, for finding joy and building connections that will carry us through to survive the

struggles, both personal and political, of dealing with overload. There is a revolutionary capacity of love, and we can find this spirit persisting even in the midst of the artificial sickness we have created as a global society. But before we can arrive at a new ground of hope, we must work through our mourning of what has been lost and the melancholia that follows.

- 27 Michael Marder and Patricia Vieira speak of the importance of memory for there to be hope in a new future. If we only remember the negative, and dwell exclusively on the lies and the loss, we will find ourselves without hope. This relates well to the role of the melancholy in the songs of Gorillaz. Marder and Vieira write that “Utopian hope without memory is senseless ; utopian memory bereft of hope is empty... utopia would entail, in a certain sense, a work of mourning or, better yet, the melancholic incorporation of these possibilities into the horizons of its future.”⁷
- 28 *Plastic Beach* moves through several acts of mourning and melancholy, perhaps most notably in the tracks “Broken” and “On Melancholy Hill,” tracks which stand out as the only songs in which Albarn does not incorporate collaborative artists on vocals. While personal in nature, consistent with the album’s context, the tracks reflect upon the state of our environment, the loss of hope and the burdens which have made maintaining love and connection difficult. But in the melancholic remembrance of past hopes and loves, we also find strength and inspiration to carry on. We remember our motivations, our aspirations, the will to work at reviving and recreating those feelings that mean so much to us.
- 29 Nicolas Bourriaud’s work in art theory associates much of postmodernity with a sense of malaise, failing to properly mourn and take in what was lost in the rush to “progress.” *Plastic Beach* is an artistic effort to move forward in the work of mourning so that we may find a way to start again, no place else than in the middle of our collective malaise.

Gorillaz and collaborative creation : A utopian model of cosmopolitan collaboration ?

- 30 Nicolas Bourriaud contends that “We must move beyond the peaceful and sterile coexistence of reified cultures (multiculturalism) to a state of cooperation among cultures that are equally critical of their own identity – that is to say, we must reach the stage of translation.”⁸ The collaborative nature of Gorillaz accords with this aesthetic of cultural translation. Collaborative creation is at the heart of Gorillaz and their approach is unique in popular cultural production. The project crosses supposed divisions between art forms (cartoon, music and video) as well as across musical genres, national borders and generational gaps. So the manner in which the project has taken shape is itself a utopian experiment.
- 31 Gorillaz’ manner of collaborative creation opens possibilities for cultural production that have been relatively unexplored. The practice is reminiscent of what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “contamination,” and offers some most interesting advances in learning and culture. Appiah states that he likes the word contamination, because it “sounds bad, to talk about something that I think is actually good” and he states that a lot “of what is interesting about what humans do comes not from purity but from

contamination.”⁹ The Gorillaz project refuses the purity of genres, allowing a space for disparate components to build a new, coherent rhythm.

- 32 It is somewhat cliché at this point for such collaborations between figures in western rock and pop to “team up” with global performers, or play at marginalized styles. This has often come across in something like the following manner : a group of “others” who portray themselves in a very traditional or defined cultural identification around the central figure of a liberal, enlightened, white male centerpiece. While forms of cultural crossing in that mold have sometimes constituted an essential step towards global recognition, they have also illuminated how much the gap still stood between who had the freedom of expression and self-definition.
- 33 I contend that Gorillaz comes much closer to the style of collaboration that both Appiah and Bourriaud recommend, in which the partners have both a critical relation to their own positions and come with an openness to being changed by the others through the collaborative process.
- 34 The *Plastic Beach* track “White Flag” is an excellent example of how different the Gorillaz collaborations have been. The track begins with an instrumental piece performed by the Syrian National Orchestra for Arabic Music, building up to set the stage for the tag-team rap verses of British M.C.s Kano and Bashy. The song lyrics play out as if the pair have just arrived on the plastic beach. They envision a paradise and a means of escaping the smog and hatred which pollutes the outside world. But the lyrics are also filled with ambiguity. Are Kano and Bashy dreaming and engaging in escapist fancy ? Or are they awakening to the real possibility of a new beginning ? Is it both ? Or is the answer yet to be decided ?
- 35 The song itself portrays a playful opening to breaking down divisions and hostilities, and the music itself speaks of the possibilities as yet to be explored modes of collaboration. Never does Albarn take the microphone in the song. “White Flag” portrays, in several ways, the types of possibilities and the hospitality that the lyrics yearn for. The unexpected mingling of traditional Arabic sounds and modern English hip hop beats, is itself a gesture of utopian possibilities. In a political world where the clash of civilizations was recently considered absolute, the song demonstrates a vibrant synergy between cultures, not subordinating one to another, but allowing each to express itself on the record while creating something that would not be possible without this meeting in translation.
- 36 The unexpected collaboration between the founding figures of Gorillaz, Hewlett and Albarn, is itself a novel crossing. The artificial personas and alternate / parallel world constructed and sustained through the website and videos by Hewlett’s artistic team have given the freedom to Albarn and his collaborators to succeed in drawing in a wide range of artists, intersecting an astonishing variety of styles. The project works as an effort to bridge cultural gaps and artistic divisions. Gorillaz have worked with collaborators from the U.K., North America, Scandinavia, the Caribbean, the Middle East, China and Africa. While actively seeking out young talents, the band has also involved a diverse range of iconic figures such as Lou Reed, Bobby Womack, De La Soul, Mark E. Smith, and Ike Turner who have all contributed to Gorillaz releases and performances.
- 37 Hip hop has played a particularly prominent role in the mix of genres with which Gorillaz have worked. Rappers who have contributed their work to Gorillaz range from

underground to mainstream, many from the U.S., such as Mos Def and Snoop Dogg, alongside a host of rappers from the U.K. such as Kano and Bashy. Others who have performed with Gorillaz include a brass ensemble, symphonic players, an Arabic orchestra and a gospel choir.

- 38 Such a wide range of collaboration is itself a point of utopian inspiration, pointing to possibilities outside of the general constructs which are taken to divide musical styles and constitute what makes for a band. So too, the sharing and comradeship of these collaborations is consistent with a message that comes through strongly in both *Demon Days* and *Plastic Beach*, which is to insist upon the power of love and the joy of life to overcome the divisions and hostilities that pollute the world we inhabit.

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RÉSUMÉS

La musique et l'univers multimédia de Gorillaz portent sur la question du « futur » depuis la création du groupe. Nous caractérisons les thèmes de chacune des trois phases de la production du groupe ainsi : première phase : tension millénaire, deuxième phase : fin du monde, troisième phase : surcharge. La première phase de Gorillaz décrit le commencement du nouveau millénaire comme un futur déjà en décomposition, payant au prix fort les rêves avortés du progrès. Cette phase coïncide avec le tournant du millénaire, qui aurait dû ouvrir sur « l'avenir » : à la place surgit un paysage marqué par la dévastation de l'environnement, la maladie, la famine, et l'expansion de villes fantômes. La deuxième phase coïncide avec « la guerre contre le terrorisme », et Gorillaz de demander si nous sommes « les dernières âmes vivantes » au moment où la lutte pour maintenir l'espoir s'avère difficile. La troisième phase est marquée par l'arrivée des personnages virtuels du groupe sur *Plastic Beach*, allusion aux tourbillons de déchets s'accumulant dans nos océans. Le thème est l'urgence de se cramponner à l'amour et au désir face aux décombres d'un monde épave. Tout au long de cette trajectoire, le projet Gorillaz illumine l'angoisse et le désespoir de notre époque grâce à des motifs lyriques et à l'histoire fictionnelle des échappées du groupe, tout en maintenant la tension et l'angoisse au moment d'atteindre la promesse utopique dans la nuit dystopique. La promesse du futur, semble-t-il, ne peut advenir qu'à travers une confrontation à la précarité et à la catastrophe. Le projet Gorillaz développe une imagination utopique au cœur du potentiel dystopique du présent. Nous situons ainsi la musique et l'univers virtuel de Gorillaz dans une forme, bien qu'aporétique, d'utopisme critique qui vise à une transformation en intégrant les dures réalités du présent. *Plastic Beach* apparaît comme une étape permettant d'imaginer de nouvelles créations et possibilités.

The music and artwork of Gorillaz have raised questions surrounding "the future" since the group's formation. I categorize the themes of each of the three phases of Gorillaz's production as follows : Phase One : Millennial Tension, Phase Two : End Times, Phase Three : The Overload. Gorillaz first phase faces the new millennium at the onset of a future already in decay, paying for the dead dreams of progress. The first phase of Gorillaz coincides with the turn of the millennium, what was to have been "the future." But we find a landscape of environmental devastation, disease, famine, and expanding ghost towns. Phase two coincides with the "war on terror," and Gorillaz portentously ask if we are "the last living souls" as the struggle to hold onto hope proves difficult. Phase three marks Gorillaz arrival on *Plastic Beach*, a riff on the gyres of garbage mounting in our oceans. The pressing theme is about holding on to love and desire in the face of world wreckage. Throughout this arc, the Gorillaz project thematically illuminates the

anxiety and despair of our age through lyrical motifs and the story of the fictional band's escapades, maintaining this sense of anxiety and tension while reaching for utopian promise in the dystopian night. Any possible future, it seems, must be built in the face of precariousness and catastrophe. The Gorillaz project expresses a utopian imagination in the midst of the dystopian potential of the present. I situate Gorillaz music and presentation in a critical, though aporetic, utopianism which seeks transformation by incorporating the harsh realities of the present. Plastic Beach emerges as a stage for the imagination of new creations and possibilities.

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Palabras claves : distopía, utopía, Gorillaz

Mots-clés : dystopie, utopie, Gorillaz

Keywords : dystopia, utopia, Gorillaz

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