

KEELEY TRAVEL is a travel agency that doesn't sell holidays run by architectural historian Tom Keeley. This travelling agency acts as both guide and tourist, visiting one destination at a time. KEELEY TRAVEL is interested in the echo between people and their surroundings and how the tourist can show us what the everyday through architectures, landscapes, histories and geographies. Design by Simon D. Niquille.

Landscapes of Pop bangerism

The world's a bit of a mess is it not? Climate catastrophe/the Tories/Trump up for winning a second term/the Tories/toxic masculinity/the Tories/not to mention absolute bore-offs spouting guff on Twitter that I shouldn't even engage with but sometimes do just to trigger myself (this needs to stop). Anyway, it's been a while since the last Keeley Travel and here we are again, this time with a diversion off the usual topic of rural Irish architecture (shout out the bungalows) and onwards into landscapes of pop divadom.

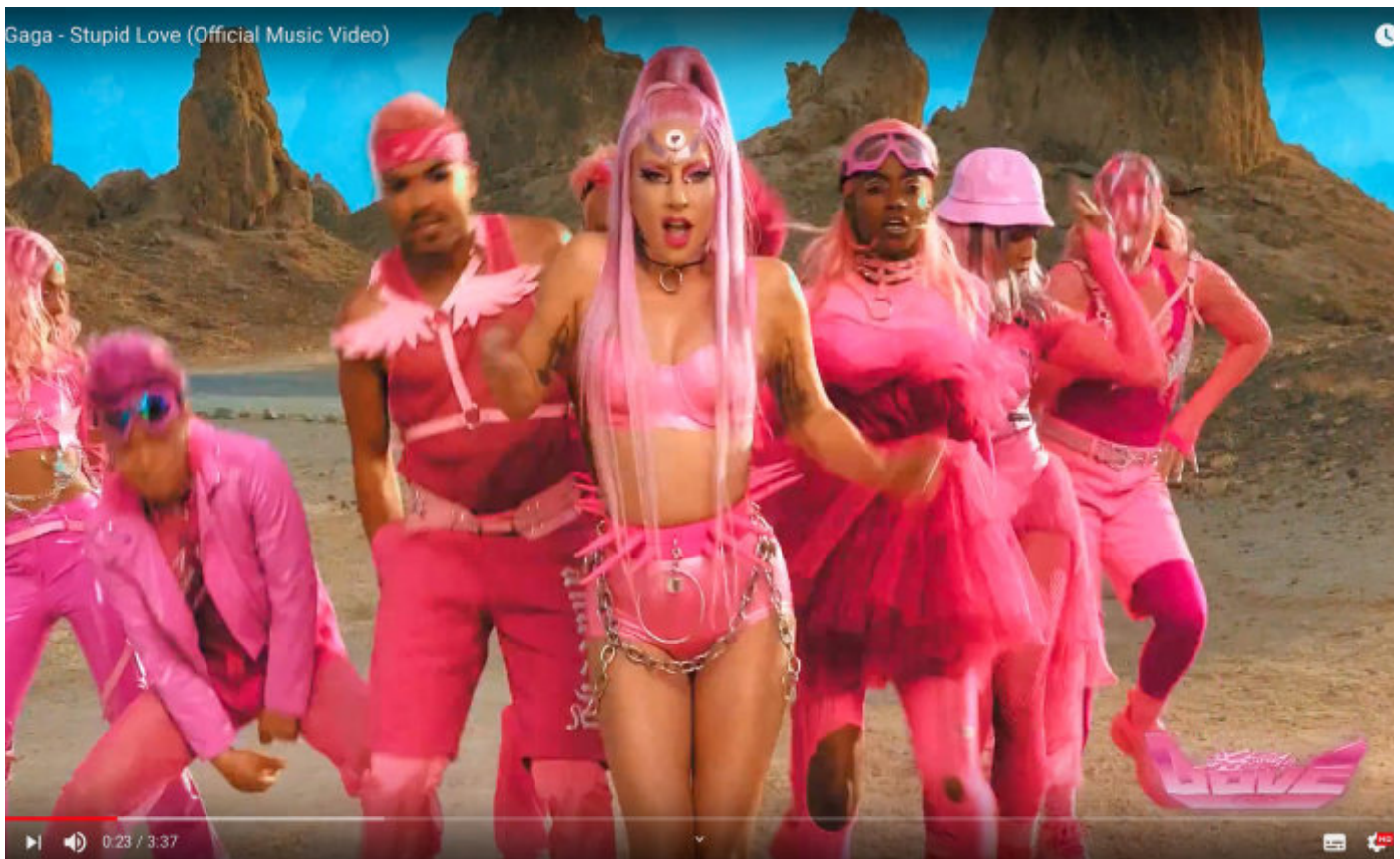
This morning a friend of mine put me on to the latest output of infamous show-off and elusive chanteuse Lady Gaga. Say what you like about Gaga, look down your nose if you like, but let it never be said that she doesn't know her way around a pop banger. The woman writes

them with her eyes closed. So as a happy distraction from impending PhD deadlines I decide to look a little more closely at this world she inhabits and where it takes us.

Gaga's latest single 'Stupid Love' is right on both counts: it is completely stupid and I love it. It begins with some pseudo-deep dross about different tribes and the world being in crisis and love saving the day etc etc, but quickly gets to the good stuff: hand-in-the-air euphoric pop bangerism. Now Gaga knows her audience (the gays), and here she is preaching to the choir via some absolutely ridiculous (read: amazing) looks and the deft use of a very swooshy pink wig.

The scene is thus, we're on a far-flung planet where it's mainly mountains (some of which appear to be

'Stupid Love', Lady Gaga (2020)



made of glitter) and desert. There's plenty of space for group dance routines and there are visual echoes (open landscapes, wild outfits, high kicks) of 'Say You'll Be There' by the Spice Girls (1996). This landscape of Gaga is kind of nowhere, it's not meant to be somewhere we actually relate to, it's somewhere to escape to: a parallel world where Mad Max is styled in neon by Primark.

Here we have a geography of otherworldliness, of 'freaking out' and 'getting down' (L. Gaga, 2020), soundtracked by synths and handclaps and some peculiar high-pitched oohs and aaahs that are straight out of a turn-of-the-millennium dance hit. It's both daft and excellent at the same time. I don't really care whether she's in on the joke or not, though she probably is. IT'S JUST SO GOOD! A buffet of escapism and silliness and probably weapons grade psychedelics.

Gaga's not alone in this tromp l'oeil intergalacticism. She comes from a long lineage of explorers and there is much important work in the canon, ranging from 'Break Free' (A. Grande, 2014), to 'Oops!...I Did It Again', (B. Spears, 2004), 'Wherever, Whenever', (S. Shakira, 2001), and beyond. It seems pretty clear to me that Ariana has been supping the same Kool-Aid as Gaga, with almost identical landscapes that for some reason seem to be purple and brown. Quite the interplanetary palette non? There's the usual sparkly bodysuits and poor man's Mel Gibson a la Thunderdome garb, but that's par for the course and I'm not angry about it. Britney's space mission however is just mad. Which feels appropriate. This is pure pre-shaved head Brit and post-Timberlake. She's on Mars in a cave slash nightclub, and descends from the ceiling in what can only be described as a space version of one of those bellboy luggage trolleys. The Titanic 'heart of the ocean' interlude is a curveball but I'm here for it and there's no denying it's a hit. Shakira may not actually be on the moon and is perhaps just in the Andes as is her want. Still a banger.

Perhaps there is necessary fantasy in these strong female vocalists choosing off-world locations for their imagined communities (hey Benedict Anderson!)? With everything that's going on in the world, be that personal or political, maybe we need these women to take us somewhere else, even just for a three and a half minutes of high-nrg nonsense? Or then again maybe I'm missing the point and it's something else entirely.

Going back to the gays for a second, with this sure to be a hit in every gay bar up and down the country if not THE WORLD – cue a thousand badly mimed dance routines: come on ladies now let's get in formation – the parallel world of Planet Gaga speaks to that of leaving your day to day drudgery behind and heading up town on a Friday night.

These nowhere landscapes become more and more pertinent when one pauses to consider the loss of queer spaces (or other late-night venues) where you can even go and dance to Gaga and others. While only in my wildest dreams would Gaga have frequented the Joiners Arms (RIP) on Hackney Road in the late 2000s one can imagine she'd have something to say about it being sold off for luxury fucking flats. She'd have been livid holding court in the smoking area like the rest of us.

I don't really care if the lyrics are tosh and the CGI geographies are ridiculous, the music we get is a reflection of the world around us, even if that reflection means we choose to head to the nearest pub and do the splits to 'Something Kinda Ooh' by Girls Aloud. The public gets what the public wants. While everything around us turns to shit it's good to take solace where you can. Turns out that if in space no one can hear you scream, they can 'hear you belt out a massive chorus' (Cragg, 2020).

'Say You'll Be There', Spice Girls (1996)



'Break Free', Ariana Grande (2014)





'Stupid Love', Lady Gaga (2020)

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