

All About *Lux*

Lux—the decadent, multi-lingual, genre-defying album recently released by Spanish superstar Rosalía—has captivated the pop music critical establishment like few other albums of recent years. *Rolling Stone* hailed it a “timeless work of art” before it was even released to the public.¹ Perhaps the album’s most astonishing feature is Rosalía’s eclectic approach to her lyrics, which are written in thirteen different languages across the album’s eighteen tracks.² It is an unusual technical accomplishment for a pop album—that is, if we can even call it “pop.” Responding to Rosalía’s discerning use of operatic vocals and her collaborations with the London Symphony Orchestra and composer Caroline Shaw, some commentators have questioned, albeit tentatively, whether *Lux* is in fact a *classical* album.³ In a podcast interview for the *New York Times*, Rosalía admitted that even her own sister does not consider her music pop. She disagrees, however: “I want to think that my music is pop. It’s just another way of making pop. There has to exist another way of making it pop!”⁴

This other way of making pop also requires other ways of listening to pop. Indeed, the collage of language and musical styles in this album upsets the patterns of easy consumption of pop music, especially on social media. As Kelefa Sanneh writes in *The New Yorker*, “*Lux* wants to make us stop whatever we’re doing and listen, which inevitably means that it’s less broadly appealing—less listenable, in a sense—than albums that ask less.”⁵ This is deliberate, of course: “The more we are in the era of dopamine,” Rosalía explains, “the more I want the opposite.”⁶ To be fair, there are plenty of dopamine rushes in *Lux*, like the hypnotic ostinatos and flamenco *palmas* rhythms of “La Madrugá.” But halfway through this song, Rosalía switches from Spanish to Ukrainian, inducing curious listeners to take to the internet for translations. There they might also learn that the song is inspired by the life of

1. Julyssa Lopez, Maya Georgi, Tomás Mier, “Rosalía Skewers an Ex, Sings in 14 Languages, Rethinks Marriage, and More ‘Lux’ Takeaways,” *Rolling Stone*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/rosalia-lux-meaning-takeaways-1235461405/>.

2. There are fifteen tracks on the streaming versions of the album.

3. Andrew McIntyre, “But Is It Classical? Shining a Light on Rosalía’s LUX,” *Page Turner by Medici.tv*, January 2, 2026, <https://pageturner.medici.tv/en/but-is-it-classical-shining-a-light-on-rosalias-lux>.

4. Joe Coscarelli et al., “Rosalía’s Thrilling New Avant-Pop Swerve: Singing in 13 Languages,” *Arts, The New York Times*, October 30, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/30/arts/music/rosalia-lux-interview.html>.

5. Kelefa Sanneh, “Rosalía Doesn’t Want to Take It Easy,” *Pop Music, The New Yorker*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/17/lux-rosalia-music-review>.

6. Coscarelli et al., “Rosalía’s Thrilling New Avant-Pop Swerve.”

the tenth-century Eastern Orthodox saint Olga of Kiev, who wrought bloody revenge on the neighboring Drevlians who had murdered her husband, providing some context for the lines sung in Ukrainian: “I am not seeking revenge / revenge is seeking me.” In fact, each track of the album draws on the writing and hagiographies of a female saint or mystic, ranging from Hildegard von Bingen (“Berghain”) to Sufi mystic Rābī’a al-’Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (“La Yugal”). *Lux* invites, or else demands, its audience to listen closely in order to make sense of the spiritual (and, in the case of “La Madrugá,” political) provocations of the album.

I spent much of my Fall 2025 semester listening closely to recent popular music while teaching a new seminar I designed for first-year undergraduates at Princeton University titled “Love Songs.” This course did not focus on “love song” as a genre as such (it isn’t one), but rather on what we can learn about love and desire in the music we listen to in our daily lives. For both me and my students, the class afforded a special opportunity to spend time not only listening closely to music, but also discussing the nature of love alongside influential thinkers ranging from Plato to Andrea Long Chu. We were reading bell hooks’s evergreen book *All About Love: New Visions* (1999) during the November when *Lux* was released. The timing was serendipitous, for *Lux* is indeed all about love. And like hooks, Rosalía understands love in spiritual terms as something achieved through self-sacrifice in loving service for the other. Listening to the song “Berghain” (at that point the album’s most popular track) in class, my students were easily able to see this connection between Rosalía and hooks. Much less clear, however, was how to make sense of the violent, patriarchal lyrics that end the song. What I provide here, then, is a close listening of “Berghain” that I wish I could have offered in that class. I contend that the shocking ending of the song, understood ironically, constitutes Rosalía’s own incisive critique of a loveless patriarchal culture, mirroring that of hooks. In doing so, my reading serves to unpack Rosalía’s own vision of love in this song and album.

“Berghain” opens with florid violin arpeggios played at break-wrist speed over a chugging baroque-ish accompaniment provided by the London Symphony Orchestra. This orchestral accompaniment slows to a complete stop only to return at full speed at the entry of what sounds like a Handelian chorus on uppers, singing (in German, of course), “His fear is my fear / his rage is my rage / his love is my love / his blood is my blood.” Here, the self becomes one with the divine other through sublime annihilation. It’s exhilarating. Juxtaposed with fear, rage, and blood, love in the face of the divine is not tender or achingly bittersweet—as in much popular music—but utterly terrifying, even violent. The influence of mystical thought is unmistakable, especially that of the twentieth-century philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, whom Rosalía has cited as a major influence.⁷ In the chorus of “Berghain,” we hear not the destruction of the self, but rather what Weil termed *decreation*: an undoing of the self that permits the experience of “the direct radiance of [God’s] love.”⁸ The self disappears into a union with God.

The song also has its gentler moments of *decreation*. In a more intimate verse sung in Spanish, Rosalía confesses that, like a sugar cube, “I know how to disappear / When you come, that’s when I leave.” This complete self-negation, while central to mystical writing,

7. Ibid.

8. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge Classics (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 32.

seems rather antithetical to the reciprocity and equality of modern love. But mystics from Hildegard to Weil remind us of the necessity of negativity in love. As Simon Critchley notes in his recent philosophical study of mysticism, “Love is a process of stripping away, cutting away, tearing away, that opens us up to what exceeds the self and the realm of knowledge.”⁹ In our modern, dopamine-addicted world, it can be hard to open up to anything that threatens to rupture the boundaries of the self, especially when those ruptures induce pain, longing, and anguish. For philosophers like Byung-Chul Han, this is the very reason there is a crisis of love today: we have become narcissists who struggle to love because we fear the necessarily negativizing encounter of the other as fundamentally Other.¹⁰

Rosalía seems to be on the same page, or at least in a similar book, in “Berghain.” After one last return of the German chorus, now rhythmically augmented at half-speed, the otherworldly voice of Björk intervenes with a revelation. The orchestral accompaniment dies down to just a pulsing rhythm in the low strings, over which we hear, in English, “The only way to save us is through divine intervention.” I do not get the sense that Rosalía (or, for that matter, Björk) wants us to convert to Catholicism for our salvation. It is love that saves. But this salvation is only possible through some form of self-negation, what hooks saw as the “empty[ing] of the ego so that space can exist for us to recognize the needs of others and be capable of fulfilling them.”¹¹ Only in relinquishing our narcissism can we start to live in loving service and care for others (as Other).¹² It is not something that happens on its own or on our own, but in communion with others, which can, but does not have to, include God. The divine intervention heralded by Björk is no religious annunciation, but rather the opening onto the redeeming possibilities of love made possible by the decreation of the self.

It is, however, the voice of American musician Yves Tumor that intervenes at the end of the song, repeatedly rapping the line “I’ll fuck you till you love me.” My students, who until this point were enthralled by the song, were stunned into silence. Its threat of sexual violence is profoundly uncomfortable. Even critics who make note of this shocking line offer little in the way of interpretation. Sanneh’s review in *The New Yorker*, for example, only points out its provenance in an infamous 2002 press conference given by Mike Tyson, during which Tyson confronted an audience member shouting “I’ll fuck you till you love me, faggot.”¹³ This sudden, bewildering, moment functions like one of Heinrich Heine’s ironic ruptures of mood (*Stimmungsbrücke*): here it reveals the darker side of the ecstasy of annihilation by switching to the perspective of the one doing the annihilating. It prompts a retroactive hearing of the song’s chorus, accentuating how violence, without grace, often accompanies decreation. The self-sacrifice and self-negation that opens a path to love can also be easily exploited.

hooks was all too aware of the ways that people, especially men, take advantage of the love of others. The new visions of love she lays out in *All About Love*, formed at the end of the twentieth century, are principally correctives to a loveless patriarchal society obsessed

9. Simon Critchley, *Mysticism*, (New York, NY: The New York Review of Books, 2024), 89.

10. Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 1–3.

11. bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2000), 217.

12. Ibid.

13. Sanneh, “Rosalía Doesn’t Want to Take It Easy.”

with power and domination. The fundamental logic of this patriarchal culture is the belief that the strong must exercise power over the weak as a matter of natural law. Not only is this belief still widespread today (to put it mildly), but it is also what makes the mutuality of loving relationships impossible, perpetuating for hooks a loveless society.¹⁴ What is especially sinister about the ending of “Berghain”—and indeed, about Tyson’s tirade—is the fucked-up idea that love could emerge from the exercise of violent domination. Yet, as hooks reveals, this idea is engrained in patriarchy. Throughout *All About Love*, she points out how men are taught that love is not something they give to others, but “something they should receive without expending effort.”¹⁵ It follows that love can therefore be won—or taken—from a presumably weaker party. Within this rape culture, women, like “faggots,” are failed men who do not have the strength to take what should be given to them without reciprocation.

Loving others with care, responsibility, and service liberates us from the logic of this patriarchal worldview. And in “Berghain,” it is this very worldview that fails. Tumor’s repetitions of “I’ll fuck you till you love me” diminish into the repetition of “till you love me,” which soon starts to sound more like a question: “Do you love me?” In its homophonic play on Tyson’s homophobic speech, performed by the nonbinary Tumor, this song breaks down the quotation’s logic of patriarchal domination to reveal the fragility and lovelessness that lies behind it. The sadistic usurping of the divine, by casting oneself as having the power to annihilate, becomes impotent as the repetition of the words “love me” are spoken into a silent void in the last moments of the track. Rosalía’s evocation of mysticism provokes a different relationship to the void as the fundamental negativity that discloses the divine. In embracing that negativity through a process of decreation, we create a space for the encounter with the other, whether divine or human, that requires us to love. Without love, it is just a terrifying void. “Complete surrender,” Rosalía admits, “is what I actually needed to say and sing about and do.”¹⁶

Rosalía offers this mystical vision of love as an antidote to the narcissism that pervades the modern world. The surrender she advocates is not forced on her from outside but freely offered from within. Surrender, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, thus requires effort. Weil termed this kind of active passivity a “negative effort” (*un effort négatif*), seeing it as an ideal form of attention that entails emptying the mind so that one can be open to receiving the truth (with both a lowercase t and capital T).¹⁷ “Negative effort” could also describe the way Rosalía wants us to listen to *Lux* within our modern attention economy of easy thrills. While such listening requires effort—reading the lyrics in translation, contemplating their meaning, researching what inspired them—it is in service of an experience that, with any luck, reveals the negativity that makes love possible. This way of listening is not exclusive to any genre. Rosalía’s *Lux* reminds us that to listen closely to music, and to surrender to that music, is itself an act of loving. ■

14. hooks, *All about Love*, 97.

15. Ibid., 114.

16. Coscarelli et al., “Rosalía’s Thrilling New Avant-Pop Swerve.”

17. Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1992), 111–12.