

On Taylor Swift and Broken Glass: Confessional Pop, Psychological Intimacy, and Two-Way Authentication

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Lou Reed has lied to us all.

In an interview for Australian TV, he shuts down a journalist who asks him if—in light of his songs that depict sadomasochism and homosexuality—he is either a sadomasochist or a homosexual. “Sometimes,” he answers sarcastically. And then: “What does it have to do with me?”¹ He flagrantly dismisses the idea that his music should communicate something truthful or authentic about his psyche. Why should it? So what if it’s all a lie?

Reed’s answer seems difficult to parse in today’s climate, one in which popular music is so widely understood to be a vehicle for self-expression. His work seems raw, visceral, spinning complex emotional tapestries out of the simplest musical and lyrical gestures. Yet with one sentence, he calls into question everything that we believed these confessional songs to be giving us: truth, intimacy, honesty. In doing so, he seems deliberately to shatter something in them—or, perhaps, something in us.

Our aim here is to examine these shattered pieces by considering confessional pop music at large: the particular contemporary logic by which the perceived intimacy of confession is sought out and interpreted by listeners, and the particular mechanisms of authentication that such intimacy sets in motion. To understand the workings of confessional pop as it is valued by modern audiences, we turn away from Lou Reed to ground our discussion—after a brief historical and theoretical prelude—in the music of perhaps the most widely known active pop musician of our current cultural “moment,” Taylor Swift.

¹ lusidghost, “Lou Reed Interview,” video, YouTube, November 25, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf2pF5oMdP4>.

Though the confessional mode has a long history in the Western artistic landscape, it appears to have burgeoned and accreted into a set of aesthetic principles sometime during the twentieth century. “The use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession grows apace in our day,” M.L. Rosenthal wrote in 1959 in a review of Robert Lowell’s collection of poems *Life Studies*,² Lowell representing part of the highly successful wave of mid-century American confessional poetry that would also come to include his students Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.³ In popular music, too, the confessional began to flourish around this time. The 1960s and ’70s saw confessional songwriters such as Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, and James Taylor gain widespread popularity,⁴ with records such as Taylor’s *Sweet Baby James* (1970) and Mitchell’s *Blue* (1971) promising listeners intimate access to the performers’ inner emotional worlds. The same commitment would be made in numerous rock music subcultures of the following decades, such as indie in the 1990s, which emphasized honesty of expression and a suspicion of performative artifice.⁵ Such subcultures generally identified themselves with an anti-commercial agenda, positioning their confessional style against what they held to be the polished, insincere images of mainstream pop. The promise of the musical confession, after all, is not only that it is true, but that it is revealing, personal—an invitation to slip beneath the surface of celebrity and bear witness to the private life of a singer in all its vulnerability.

In recent times, however, the confessional mode has moved out of the domain of musical subculture—rock ’n’ roll of the ’60s, the indie scenes of the ’90s—to attain a certain pervasiveness in popular music discourse at large. Nicola Dibben writes of “a cultural system

² M.L. Rosenthal, *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York, NY: Persea Books, 1990), 109.

³ Blake Morrison, “The Worst Thing I Ever Did: The Contemporary Confessional Memoir,” in *On Life-Writing*, ed. Zachary Leader (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 202.

⁴ David R. Shumway, *Rock Star: The Making of Musical Icons from Elvis to Springsteen* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 148–60.

⁵ Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 62–3; Ryan Hibbett, “What is Indie Rock?” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 1 (2005), 62.

within which music is a means for self-expression,” as well as a contemporary “compositional ideology in which singers understand themselves to be expressing things about or from their own experience.”⁶ Jeanette Bicknell, too, has noted with regard to popular music that “although we accept for the most part that actors play at being someone else, we expect singers, at some level, to be themselves, or at least to be true to the persona they have established.”⁷ Such observations evidence the rise of honesty as an aesthetic preoccupation in the production and reception of recent pop music, shown also by the fact that appealing to an artist’s biographical details to analyze their music has been a standard technique in recent pop music criticism and even some of its scholarly analysis.⁸ It is perhaps no surprise that some of indie’s purists were already proclaiming its death more than a decade ago: where the term “indie” once referred strictly to a subculture within ’90s rock music, it is today a label applied to even the most commercially successful artists—among them, Phoebe Bridgers, The 1975, and even Taylor Swift in her more acoustic modes.⁹ “Indie” has, in these latter cases, become a term used to signify supposed confessional credibility. Its detachment as a genre label from anti-commercialist connotations, and its new function as a marker of some of the most

⁶ Nicola Dibben, “Vocal Performance and the Projection of Emotional Authenticity,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 319, 331.

⁷ Jeanette Bicknell, “Just a Song? Exploring the Aesthetics of Popular Song Performance,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 3 (2005), 267.

⁸ For the reliance on artists’ biographical details in music criticism, see Alexis Petridis, “Dave: Psychodrama Review—the Boldest and Best British Rap Album in a Generation,” *Guardian*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/mar/08/dave-psychodrama-review-best-british-rap-album>; Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, “SOS: Sza,” *Pitchfork*, December 9, 2022, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/sza-sos/>; for the same phenomenon in scholarly analysis, see Jason Haslam, “Samuel R. Delany, Lou Reed, and Utopia’s Queer End,” *Utopian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2017), 247–67; Jessica A. Holmes, “Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023), 785–829; Ariana Phillips-Hutton, “Private Words, Public Emotions: Performing Confession in Indie Music,” *Popular Music* 37, no. 3 (2018), 329–50; Susan Suhadolnik, “Outside Voices and the Construction of Adele’s Singer-Songwriter Persona,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 179–86.

⁹ Rachel Maddux, “Is Indie Dead?” *Paste*, January 26, 2010, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/is-indie-dead/>. For Phoebe Bridgers labelled as “indie,” see Jenessa Williams, “Phoebe Bridgers Review—Cathartic Indie Superstar Helps Her Young Fans Emotionally Purge,” *Guardian*, July 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jul/24/phoebe-bridgers-review-cathartic-indie-superstar-helps-her-young-fans-emotionally-purge/>; for The 1975 labelled as “indie,” see Ann Powers, “Love Songs of a Dirtbag,” *NPR*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/14/1128796265/the-1975-dirtbag-being-funny-in-a-foreign-language/>; for Taylor Swift labelled as “indie,” see Wade Landry, “Is Taylor Swift’s New Album an Indie Record?” *Natural Music*, n.d., <https://www.naturalmusic.co/blog-posts/is-taylor-swifts-new-album-an-indie-record/>.

successful pop music on the market, speaks to the ubiquitous absorption of many of its aesthetic tenets—confessionality, for one—into popular music discourse.

Where scholars have attempted to explain the appeal of confessionality’s performative honesty, and our apparent need to “believe in music’s truthfulness,”¹⁰ they have often pointed to notions of authenticity, specifically as ascribed to the performer. Allan Moore has used the term “first-person authenticity” to refer to the sense that the performer’s “utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience.”¹¹ For Moore, this kind of authenticity serves to legitimize the performer in some way, because it evidences the performer’s apparent “refus[al] to ‘sell out’ to commercial interests.”¹² Others, too, have pointed to the authenticating function of performative honesty,¹³ with Dibben noting that in a modern culture of celebrity, “public interest in the private lives of stars reveals a desire to go beyond the image of the star and to the reality of a star’s private self.”¹⁴ When, through confession, the performer’s commercial image ostensibly falls away to reveal their personal identity, it satisfies that desire for intimate access. Dibben

¹⁰ Derek B. Scott, “Introduction,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 4.

¹¹ Allan Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002), 214.

¹² *Ibid.*, 213.

¹³ Philip Auslander, “Musical Persona: The Physical Performance of Popular Music,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 303–15; Kai Arne Hansen, “(Re)Reading Pop Personae: A Transmedial Approach to Studying the Multiple Construction of Artist Identities,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (2019), 501–29; Emil Kraugerud, “Come Closer: Acousmatic Intimacy in Popular Music Sound” (Ph.D. diss., Oslo, University of Oslo, 2020).

¹⁴ Dibben, “Vocal Performance and the Projection of Emotional Authenticity,” 317. While beyond the scope of this article, there is an interesting connection to be made between this desire to “go beyond the surface” of the celebrity and the desire to “go beyond the surface” of consumer products more generally. Georg Simmel traced the roots of this desire back to the urban consumer culture emerging in the early twentieth century, where with the omnipresence of strangers and shop windows, consumers were constantly required to exercise suspicion of surface appearances. Numerous scholars have proposed connections between the resultant widespread “deception anxiety” and contemporary visual art and literature. For Georg Simmel’s work on suspicion in urban consumer culture, see Georg Simmel, *Sociology of the Senses: Visual Interaction*, ed. Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Watson Burgess (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Thousand Oaks, 1997). On “deception anxiety,” see David R. Shumway, “Authenticity: Modernity, Stardom, and Rock & Roll,” *Modernism/Modernity* 14, no. 3 (2007), 527–33; on connections between deception anxiety and visual art, see Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Roger Rothman, “Dali’s Inauthenticity,” *Modernism/Modernity* 14, no. 3 (2007), 489–97; on connections between deception anxiety and literature, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Tom Gunning, “From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and Traffic in Souls (1913),” *Wide Angle* 19, no. 4 (1997), 25–61.

refers to the kind of intimacy that arises from the staging of confession, the seemingly honest impartation of intimate truths, as “psychological intimacy,” indicating the degree to which listeners may experience a sense of access to a singer’s psyche.¹⁵

The performative honesty of the confessional, then, creates an atmosphere of psychological intimacy that lends the performer a certain authenticity. Yet focusing squarely on the performer in this way does not provide a complete picture of our encounters with this music. It is true that, as Ariana Phillips-Hutton writes, the perceived intimacy of confession “encourages listeners to form intense emotional attachments to the singers,”¹⁶ forging a parasocial relationship between listener and singer wherein the listener might feel as though the performer “understands” them—that “[t]hey ‘know’ such a persona in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends,” and “more intimately and profoundly than others do.”¹⁷ But as Phillips-Hutton notes, this kind of psychological intimacy is also “one of the primary conditions of identification,”¹⁸ of listeners feeling as though their *own* feelings or experiences are being reflected back at them.

If we are compelled to turn music into glass, it is surely not only for its function as a *window* but also for its function as a *mirror*. That is, while the mechanisms of celebrity culture place a premium on intimacy with popstars, and illusions of truthful expression thus serve to authenticate the artist, the desire of audiences not only to interact parasocially with popstars but also to identify with them gives rise to an aesthetic preoccupation with honesty as a mode of audience *self*-authentication.

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¹⁵ Dibben, “Vocal Performance and the Projection of Emotional Authenticity,” 331.

¹⁶ Phillips-Hutton, “Private Words, Public Emotions,” 344.

¹⁷ Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance,” *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956), 216. See also David Giles, “Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research,” *Media Psychology* 4, no. 3 (2002), 279–305; Elizabeth Perse and Rebecca Rubin, “Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships,” *Communication Research* 16, no. 1 (1989), 59–77; Chris Rojek, *Presumed Intimacy: Para-Social Relationships in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Phillips-Hutton, “Private Words, Public Emotions,” 340.

The reception of Taylor Swift’s music provides a useful point of departure from which to explain the dual function of confessionality: at once affording authentication to the confessor and to the confidant. Take Anna Marks’s recent essay in the *New York Times*, in which she argues that Swift signals her queer identity to listeners through coded messages embedded in her music.¹⁹ Marks refers to Swift’s presentation of a public persona bluntly as an act of “lying.” She argues that “anyone considering the whole of Ms. Swift’s artistry—the way that her brilliantly calculated celebrity mixes with her soul-baring art—can find discrepancies between the story that underpins her celebrity and the one captured by her songs” and suggests that Swift contradicts her public persona through “dropped hairpins” that signal her secret queer identity, “whether she is conscious of it or not.”²⁰

The crux of Marks’s essay is that seeking psychological intimacy with Taylor Swift the person—which she achieves, or claims to, through meticulous close reading of her lyrical content and outfit choices—is itself a form of critical inquiry. She seeks to distinguish the “commercial” in Swift’s music from the “real,” essentially reconstructing the same binary that has appeared again and again in popular music subcultures throughout the twentieth century and since, positioning their music as the authentic antithesis to mainstream pop music’s artifice (Swift’s *Lover* era, for instance, represented for Marks an “identity—not just an aesthetic”). It is implied that the location of personal expression in Swift’s music, its function as a window into her psyche, is what elevates her music to the level of “artistry.” Swift’s persona should therefore, on Marks’s account, be regarded as a lie, a dishonest front requiring careful, forensic investigation to reveal the author hiding behind it. In this sense, Marks’s quest to uncover Swift’s “true” identity is driven by a desire to authenticate Swift as an artist, to prove that her music is a vessel for self-expression and thereby defend her from

¹⁹ Anna Marks, “Look What We Made Taylor Swift Do: Guest Essay,” *New York Times*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/04/opinion/taylor-swift-queer.html>. All quotes from Marks regarding Swift from this point forward have been taken from this article.

²⁰ Marks has made a similar argument about Harry Styles: see Marks, “Harry Styles Walks a Fine Line,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/27/opinion/harry-styles-identity.html>.

accusations of superficiality; “that her art,” in other words, “may be far more complex than the eclipsing nature of her celebrity [allows].”

Yet, where Marks appears concerned with the biographical truth value of Swift’s songs, what is at stake in her investigation is a heartfelt attempt to defend the legitimacy of fans’ (including her own) responses to Swift’s music as much as it is Swift’s own authenticity. She writes that, in her early days of Taylor Swift fandom, she “kept wondering whether what [she] was perceiving in [Swift’s] work was truly there or if it was merely a mirage, born of earnest projection.” The remainder of Marks’s essay is dedicated to arguing that her perception of queerness in Swift’s music is, in fact, the former: veracious, patent, genuine. Her rousing conclusion, and her broader justification for speculating so openly about Swift’s sexuality, is that “the stories that dominate our collective imagination shape what our culture permits artists and their audiences to say and be.” With this, Marks suggests that even the possibility of Swift expressing queer identity in her music would grant her fans “cultur[al] permi[ssion]” to do the same in their own lives; to “live authentically,” as the saying goes. Not only is Swift authenticated as a performer when fans perceive confessionality in her music, then, but so too are the identities of her audiences—what they are allowed to “say and be.” The psychological intimacy Swift’s fans feel with her thus serves a *two-way* authenticating function, which it is Marks’s self-professed job as a critic to verify on both sides.²¹

Writing on the rise of the confessional mode in the 1970s, Christopher Lasch identifies the two-way authenticating function of confession early on: “the merging of actors and audience,” he writes, “provides [the spectator] with a chance to admire himself in the

²¹ Melissa Goldthwaite and Hannah Watts have both written about a similar connection between psychological intimacy and identification in the reception of confessional poetry. “The desire to believe in the accuracy of the composite [in Sylvia Plath’s work],” Goldthwaite writes, “was a desire for identification.” See Melissa Goldthwaite, “Confessionals,” *College English* 66, vol. 1 (2003), 64; Hannah Watts, “The Cult of the Noble Amateur,” *PN Review* 44, vol. 3 (2018), 13–7.

new role of pseudo-performer.”²² He observes how the psychological intimacy seemingly afforded by the confessional mode in modern cultural production constitutes a “merging” of confessor and confidant. Audiences feel so close to the performer in a psychological sense that they can effectively imagine themselves to *be* the performer—they seek to merge with the confessor in order to satisfy what Lasch considers the narcissistic impulse to imagine the confession as their own, and thus to shore up a sense of self constantly being eroded in many areas of American life.²³ Fans mimic the fashion choices of celebrity figures, visibly identifying with a broader fandom culture and community and veering towards embodying the persona themselves—as though “dressing up” as a character for a costume party.²⁴ In short, consumers identify so closely *with* performers that, in some cases, they come to identify *as* them, too.

Whether or not Lasch’s diagnosis of narcissism is accepted here, the “merging of actors and audience” provides a useful lens through which to understand Swift’s music, which seems readily to invite an identificatory response to confession. The images Swift conjures in her lyrics are detailed but rarely specific, affording recognition while avoiding the concretion that might distinguish the lyrical subject from the listener. In other words, the lyrics suggest more than they ever reveal. In “Anti-Hero” (from *Midnights*, 2022), Swift confesses widely relatable feelings of inadequacy and alienation (“Sometimes I feel like everybody’s just a sexy baby / And I’m a monster on the hill”) but leaves such feelings unspecified, never pinning them to a particular cause. There are potential biographical references to be found, but these are generally oblique enough to be easily dismissible: “Too big to hang out / Slowly lurching towards your favorite city” might refer to Swift’s life as a celebrity, or it might just as easily be a reference to the Godzilla *kaiju* trope, one that

²² Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, NY: Norton, 1978), 89.

²³ Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (London: Pan Books, 1985).

²⁴ Janice Miller, *Fashion and Music* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), esp. 29–49.

enhances the “monster” figure of the previous line. Other monstrous invocations surface throughout “Anti-Hero,” as in the lyrical crux of the chorus (“I stare directly at the sun but never in the mirror”), where the vampiric lyric “I” appears to favor her own demise above being confronted with (the reflection of) her own self-image. The lyric “I” is thus presented as a quasi-anonymous subject, which listeners may take some kind of comfort or pleasure in recognizing but whose “true” identity is refracted through layers of fantastical imagery. It is this process of identification with the oblique lyric “I” that Marks considers to be a source of validation. The notion of authorial honesty is still important in such readings—it would be less cathartic to recognize oneself in a false account—but Swift herself is not the true object of attention in them.

Further screens of fictionalization envelop Swift’s lyric “I” in the music video to “Anti-Hero.” Swift can be seen (around 1:20) crawling, grotesquely oversized, into a dining room filled with horrified guests. The scene suggests a thinly veiled subtext: that Swift, a god-like superhuman, is reviled by those who misunderstand her, viewing her as a social pariah worthy of extermination. The Swift-monster is shot by a crossbow, and as she bleeds out glittery purple goo, the partygoers escape in a frenzy. She then (around 1:50) takes a tiny wine bottle from the table and appears disappointed to find its contents drained. Such allusions, ostensibly to Disney’s 1951 film *Alice in Wonderland*, frame the lyric “I” as something of a fairytale character: someone whose identity imbricates, but is not identical, with Swift’s; one whose “reality” only materializes through a viewer’s self-identification. When such visual tropes are considered alongside certain song lyrics (say, “Tale as old as time”: a further allusion to Disney, namely the 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast*), the viewer becomes ensconced in a hypermediated nexus of intertextual references; the childlike drive to identify with fairytale princesses is mapped onto listener-viewers’ perceptions of meaning from the text.

In tandem with the lyrical and visual components of “Anti-Hero,” elements of the track’s sonic composition may be interpreted as encouraging a particular subject-position for listeners. The term “subject-position” has been drawn into music studies from film theory, where it has been used to describe how “the construction of a film causes a viewer/listener to adopt a particular attitude to what she or he is witnessing,” to demonstrate “how features of the musical materials specify the subject-position of the song.”²⁵ For Eric F. Clarke, while part of the perspective that a listener takes on a song “is utterly individual,” it is nonetheless important to attend to “the way in which music solicits, demands even, a certain closely circumscribed response from the listener by means of its own formal operations.”²⁶ In this way, if—as Swift and her team do—producers decide to make use of specific recording techniques, such as close-miking, to afford a sense of sonically mediated intimacy between singer and listener, this serves to place the listener in the position of a confidant, one whose ear is in virtual proximity to the confessor’s mouth in an acousmatic but phenomenologically real space. Identification of a confessional tone in the lyrics is therefore supported by the vocal production decisions underpinning the track. For instance, as Swift sings “I should not be left to my own devices” in a lower, quasi-spoken register, there may be a sense in which “the listener gains the illusion of access to the inner thoughts and feelings of the performer.”²⁷ The listener can do nothing to support Swift’s lyric “I” in her self-professed loneliness, but the affective impact of the virtual intersubjectivity is encouraged.

In another reading, the implied subject-position might lead the listener to feel as though they are eavesdropping on Swift talking to herself, or somehow overhearing her inner monologue. A key feature of Jack Antonoff’s production on “Anti-Hero,” as on the many other recent hits that bear his mark, is precisely this kind of implied interiority, afforded by

²⁵ Eric F. Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 92, 94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁷ Dibben, “The Intimate Singing Voice: Auditory Spatial Perception and Emotion in Pop Recordings,” in *Electrified Voices: Medial, Socio-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer*, ed. Dmitri Zakharine and Nils Meise (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2013), 107.

the heavy panning of accompaniment instrumentation enclosing the centrally emerging voice. This may be further edified through consideration of the interfaces at which this music meets its audience. Indeed, it is not just Swift’s lyricism and production decisions that activate the merging of performer and listener: in the mechanisms of recorded popular music consumption, this merging has been compounded in recent decades by developments in technologies of listening, most notably headphones. In headphone listening, the voice of the performer may appear to the listener somehow both outside and inside the space of their own head.²⁸ Insofar as the voice appears outside the listener’s head, it appears very close to them, in turn heightening the experience of the intimate affordances of the audio production. At the same time, however, the voice through headphones seems to originate from inside the space of the listener’s head. The pop performer’s voice acts in this sense, Talking Heads frontman David Byrne writes, as a “substitute for our interior voices.”²⁹ When confessionals are heard through headphones in this way, the line between confessant and confidant is blurred further; there may even be a sense for the listener of *embodying* Swift’s voice—of a merging of subjectivities.³⁰

The idea of pseudo-performative listening is also present in the logic of “curation as consumption” that is so pronounced in personalized streaming platforms such as Spotify, where playlists and listening habits are seen to reflect—even to constitute—individual personalities. Neoliberal society, Jeffrey T. Nealon writes, is marked by the demand it makes of consumers to commit themselves to “the project of endlessly creating [their] own identities and subjectivities” through personalized consumption, including the consumption of popular music.³¹ Spotify itself suggests as much in its 2022 “Future Next” report, noting that “audio

²⁸ Jacob Kingsbury Downs, “Acoustic Territories of the Body: Headphone Listening, Embodied Space, and the Phenomenology of Sonic Homeliness,” *Journal of Sonic Studies* 21 (2021).

²⁹ David Byrne, *How Music Works* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2013), 142.

³⁰ See also Downs, “Headphones, Auditory Violence and the Sonic Flooding of Corporeal Space,” *Body & Society*, 27 no. 3, 58–86.

³¹ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *I’m Not like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 23.

helps [Generation] Zs turn inward to understand and enhance their inner journeys.”³² On TikTok, too, pseudo-performance is integral to music consumption. Michel Chion coins the term “synchresis” to refer to “the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time;”³³ similarly, through lip-syncing, or simply through adding sound to an image, text, or video, the TikToker is understood syncretically to be embodying a song’s lyric “I” in some way. Swift’s “Anti-Hero” is added to videos on TikTok with the intention of highlighting how the creators of the videos think “[they’re] the problem, it’s [them];” in each case, Swift’s confession becomes their own.³⁴ Here, the confessional and intimate aesthetic of Swift’s songwriting further enables the listener to incorporate the song seamlessly into the performance of their own selfhood. Though Spotify and TikTok are very different platforms, they share important similarities: on both, consumption is figured as performance, and as such listening to confession effectively becomes a way of performing it; and on both, Taylor Swift has been hugely successful.

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Part of Swift’s success among her fanbase is rooted in her ability to authenticate the experiences and identities of her listeners while simultaneously projecting a coherent, if refracted, public persona through her songwriting and extramusical endeavors. Though cultivating an intimate aesthetic that appears to give the listener access to the contents of her diary, her songs function less as pre-packaged objects for consumption and more as spaces for the pseudo-performance of self-identity; the listener, in some sense, co-composes the lyric

³² Spotify Advertising, “Future Next,” Global Trends Report: Gen Z Creator Edition (Spotify Advertising, 2022), 1.

³³ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 63.

³⁴ On TikTok lip-syncing, see also Alexandria Arrieta, “‘This Audio Has Potential’: Platform Lip-Sync on TikTok,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 4 (2021), 5–9; on lip-syncing, performance, and embodiment, see Jacob Mallinson Bird, “Haptic Aurality: On Touching the Voice in Drag Lip-Sync Performance,” *Sound Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020), 45–64.

“I.” In this way, the boundary between confessor and confidant appears markedly unstable in confessional pop such as Swift’s—and, we argue, this instability is both intentional and (commercially) effective. Vague, relatable lyrics, together with trite popular culture tropes and fantastical intertexts, are mediated through an intimate musical aesthetic that encourages a listener to adopt a subject-position somewhere between confidant and confessor. When Swift’s multimedia outputs reach her listeners, their intimacy may be heightened to a level of intersubjective merging: in the headspace of headphone listeners or the mimetic nexus of TikTok lip-sync.

Indeed, for fans such as Marks, engaging with Swift’s music represents a practice of simultaneously reading the singer’s “true” identity through the refracted persona mediated by the music *and* finding themselves reflected in the materials. These processes of two-way authentication are co-constitutive and indivisible; the “authentic” self communicated in the musical text wraps itself around the listener’s subjectivity, producing meaning at the center of the nexus. Swift, then, hollows out a space for the listener’s own self-realization; “I’ve got a blank space, baby,” she tells her listener-lover, “and I’ll write your name” (in “Blank Space,” from *1989*, 2014). Her music offers safe haven and mutual understanding, but requires her listeners to work for it—to provide the affective labor that powers the machine.

In our encounters with Swift, we stare through screens in search of something comprehensible to consume. Swift regularly draws attention to her mediatedness: “He’s got my past frozen behind glass,” she sings in “it’s time to go” (from *evermore*, 2020), “But I’ve got me / That old familiar body ache.” She alone has access to her body-as-lived; we, her listener-lovers, know only the frozen facsimile of her experiences, set behind glass like a painting or photograph. “I look in people’s windows,” Swift goads her listeners to sing along with her (“I Look in People’s Windows,” from *The Tortured Poets Department*, 2024),

framing her musical persona as an interior into which her listeners seek access—a private world into which she invites us to stare.

As we gaze into the looking glass, Swift also encourages us to catch sight of our own reflections. “All of us, actors and spectators alike,” Lasch reminds us, “live surrounded by mirrors.”³⁵ We argue here that the glass behind which Swift freezes herself functions both as a window and as a mirror, and importantly, that this dual function is consistently encoded in the text. “I’m a mirrorball,” she claims; “I’ll show you every version of yourself tonight” (“mirrorball,” from *folklore*, 2020). This notion of versioning, of refracting claims to listener authenticity through the manufactured, nebulous prism of her music, demands of the listener: *redefine yourself again and again, but only through me*. The Swiftian mirrorball solely reflects outwards, which is ideal for Swift. In “Anti-Hero,” the vampiric Swift would sooner die than face a mirror, would rather stare directly into the sun than confront a stable self-image threatening the convenient mutability of the lyric “I,” which functions as a blank, reflective surface. Sometimes, however, there is no avoiding it: “I know delusion when I see it in the mirror,” sings Swift (“Soon You’ll Get Better,” from *Lover*, 2019), in what could be read both as a moment of rare self-reflexivity and as a mantra for the mode of listening that she invites through her intimate, confessional aesthetic.

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If psychological intimacy, then, has been shown to work reflexively in Swift’s confessional pop—not only functioning to authenticate Swift the performer but also to bring the listener closer to their own truths in some way—then the prevailing aesthetic concern with honesty that Dibben and others have observed in popular music discourse may now be understood in a more complete sense. The *New York Times* might seem a popular and, therefore, unscholarly source of music criticism from which to extrapolate, but this is precisely the

³⁵ Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 92.

point. Marks's essay is indicative of a popular phenomenon: when identification is a primary affective response, honesty becomes the aesthetic criterion by which that response can be authenticated and upheld. Moore proposed "second-person authenticity" to refer to the sense that "a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them,"³⁶ and we might extend that concept here to properly value the ways in which the modern culture industry thrives on producing not only windows but mirrors. The production and reception of Taylor Swift's music, as discussed here, speak to a mode of listening to confessional pop that involves more precisely a co-optation of the confession than its mere recognition. Thus, seeking psychological intimacy with the performer enables authentication of the performer; but also, it enables the listener to envision themselves authentically as the pseudo-performing subject.

This dual function is indeed key to the success of the modern pop performer's celebrity. In December 2023, a month before Marks's essay was published in the *New York Times*, Taylor Swift was named *TIME*'s Person of the Year. The magazine called her "the last monoculture left in our stratified world"—and while it is true that she has built a global brand, uniting many millions of fans around a shared interest in her private life as she describes it both in her music and on social media, the intimate connection fans feel with Swift is far from monocultural.³⁷ She appeals to some conservatives, who see her nostalgically as an icon of traditional white femininity, yet at the same time, she appeals to liberals, who see in her an icon of modern (white) feminism. She is straight, inviting identification from other straight women who relate to the romantic issues raised in her songs, yet she leaves enough open to interpretation that writers like Marks (and many other fans with her) can hold out the hope that she shares their queerness, finding relatability in the

³⁶ Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 220.

³⁷ Sam Lansky, "2023 Person of the Year: Taylor Swift," *TIME*, December 6, 2023, <https://time.com/6342806/person-of-the-year-2023-taylor-swift>.

way she might be hiding her sexual identity from public view, like so many queer people are forced to do. Her recent string of “Taylor’s Version” re-releases has enabled her to achieve billionaire status,³⁸ even while presenting the narrative that she is breaking free from her commercial overlords and finally “being herself.” Who that “self” really is, however, remains open to endlessly varying interpretation.

The point is precisely that, in a world dominated by mirrors, Taylor Swift can be yours. If her confessional style promises psychological intimacy, its success lies not only in the authenticity it affords her, but also in the recognition and self-authentication it sparks in so many of her fans, in so many different and seemingly contradictory ways. The title and promotional imagery of her latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), blatantly evoke Sylvia Plath and her contemporaries, mid-century confessional poets such as Lowell and Sexton, signaling a continuation of the confessional relationship Swift fosters with her fans. The album plays not just on the presentation of Swift as a tortured poet confessing her deepest secrets to us but on the fact that, under neoliberalism and its endless project of constituting selfhood through performance and performance through consumption, we are all of us tortured poets now. “So Long, London” documents the aftermath of a breakup, “The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived” vents frustrations towards an ex-partner, while “The Alchemy” sees the narrator falling wide-eyed into love. Upon releasing *Tortured Poets* into the world, Swift put these confessions up for adoption: “And now the story isn’t mine anymore,” she wrote on social media platform X. “[I]t’s all yours.”³⁹

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³⁸ Marisa Dellatto, “Taylor Swift’s New Era: The Pop Star Becomes a Billionaire,” *Forbes*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marisadellatto/2023/10/27/taylor-swifts-new-era-the-pop-star-becomes-a-billionaire>.

³⁹ Taylor Swift, “It’s a 2am surprise: The Tortured Poets Department is a secret DOUBLE album,” X, April 19, 2024, <https://x.com/taylorswift13/status/1781201469753950677>.

There are positives and negatives to be drawn here. On the one hand, recognizing yourself in art, feeling as though it reflects some part of you, can be a rewarding aesthetic experience—particularly when the aspects of your identity you find there are those downtrodden or undervalued in other areas of life. Plath, Swift, and others hold great value to some of their female audiences precisely because those audiences take comfort in seeing their experiences represented in the worlds of literature and music. Lasch was not the first or the last to recognize that to see our own reflection in the world, however vaguely and through whatever distorted lens, is to affirm our existence in it. Quoting the country singer Chely Wright, Anna Marks was right about one thing: “We need our heroes.”

Yet pinning so much on the pursuit of psychological intimacy becomes dangerous when what was presumed to be confession turns out—as it always does, to some extent, in commercial pop music—to be a performance put on for public consumption. Upon being asked about his identity “in light of” his songs, Reed responded, “What does it have to do with me?,” and he is, of course, right: that songs do not necessarily shed “light” on their authors, that we cannot truly know authors in this way, that this is not how pop music works, or indeed how authorship works, or even really how light works. Psychological intimacy is, in the end, parasocial. This fact can register as a form of dishonesty, even betrayal, when the relationship between performer and listener was, as in the confessional, in the first place one built upon the assumption of truthful expression. But also, when the apparent reality of musical intimacy collapses into illusion, we as listeners risk being left at sea with our own sense of authenticity. If we saw ourselves in the image, what, now, is left of us but imagery—the enactment of the categories of identity that popular culture sells to us?

“As both upholder and destroyer of an ideal self,” Sabine Melchior-Bonnet writes, the mirror image in the end always “either cracks or dismisses itself.”⁴⁰ Oscar Wilde once argued

⁴⁰ Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (London: Routledge, 2002), 250.

against “the decay of lying” in artistic practice,⁴¹ and he was perhaps defending a particular kind of distance: the distance created by imagination, by fakery, by an aesthetics of opaqueness. We could do well to step away from the glass sometimes.

⁴¹ Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine & Co., 1891), 9–47.