

Some perspectives on authenticity in popular music

MUS4830
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What does authenticity mean to
you?

Perspectives on authenticity

- Basic premises:
- Authenticity should **not** be regarded as an immanent quality of the music itself
- Authenticity should rather be regarded as an *effect* that is *articulated* by certain elements in the musical text that is realized in a specific context

Perspectives on authenticity

Authenticity in poststructuralist semiotics was seen to rely on a number of signs brought together to construct, represent or valorize authenticity. Instead of being perceived as emanating from an honest, sincere, inner essence, it became “authenticity”—the scare quotes directing the focus on an assemblage of signs governed by particular conventions. (Scott 2009: 3)

Perspectives on authenticity

- Rock authenticity: honest, true, real
- myths “about authenticity, beauty, and culture, on the one hand, and authenticity, rebellion, and political critique on the other” (Walsler 1993: 24)
- Rock vs. pop authenticity

Perspectives on authenticity

- Pet Shop Boys: the authenticity of the inauthentic (Hawkins 2002)
- “Acknowledging banality in any form demonstrates the probing further into pop expression and the notions of (in)authenticity it evokes” (Ibid: 148).
- *how* one communicates being true to one’s musical self as it is to notions of an actual “truth” within a given musical expression.

Perspectives on authenticity

- Simon Frith (1986): The relationship between technology and authenticity
- Example: Bing Crosby - 'Pennies From Heaven' (1936)
- Crooning as singing style was made possible by the electrical microphone
- "Legitimate" music hall or opera singers reached their concert hall audience with the power of their voice alone; the sound of the crooners, by contrast, was artificial. Microphones enabled intimate sounds to take on a pseudo-public presence, and, for the crooners' critics, technical dishonesty meant emotional dishonesty. (Frith 1986: 264)
- Crooning was forbidden by the BBC - they even questioned the singer's sexual orientation
- Unhealthy juxtaposition of moral and aesthetic values based on the interpretation of technology's effect on the music

Perspectives on authenticity

- Specter of authenticity (Middleton 2006: 199ff)
- Problems with the concept itself: rife with self-contradiction
- Unhelpful binaries: original/copy, honest/false, roots/surface
- John Lennon: Blues over jazz - simplicity = honesty and directness
- Microphones were integrated in the studio production process: close miking as norm
- Closeness = authenticity

Perspectives on authenticity

- “Authenticity is a quality of selves and of cultures; and they construct each other: which is another way of saying that the question here is not so much what or where authenticity is, but how it is produced” (Middleton 2006: 206).
- Authenticity effects

Authenticity and cover songs (re-contextualization of repertoire):

Example 1: Authenticity and taste

Celine Dion og Anastacia's cover version of AC/DC's
'You Shook Me All Night Long'

Example 2: Authenticity and nostalgia

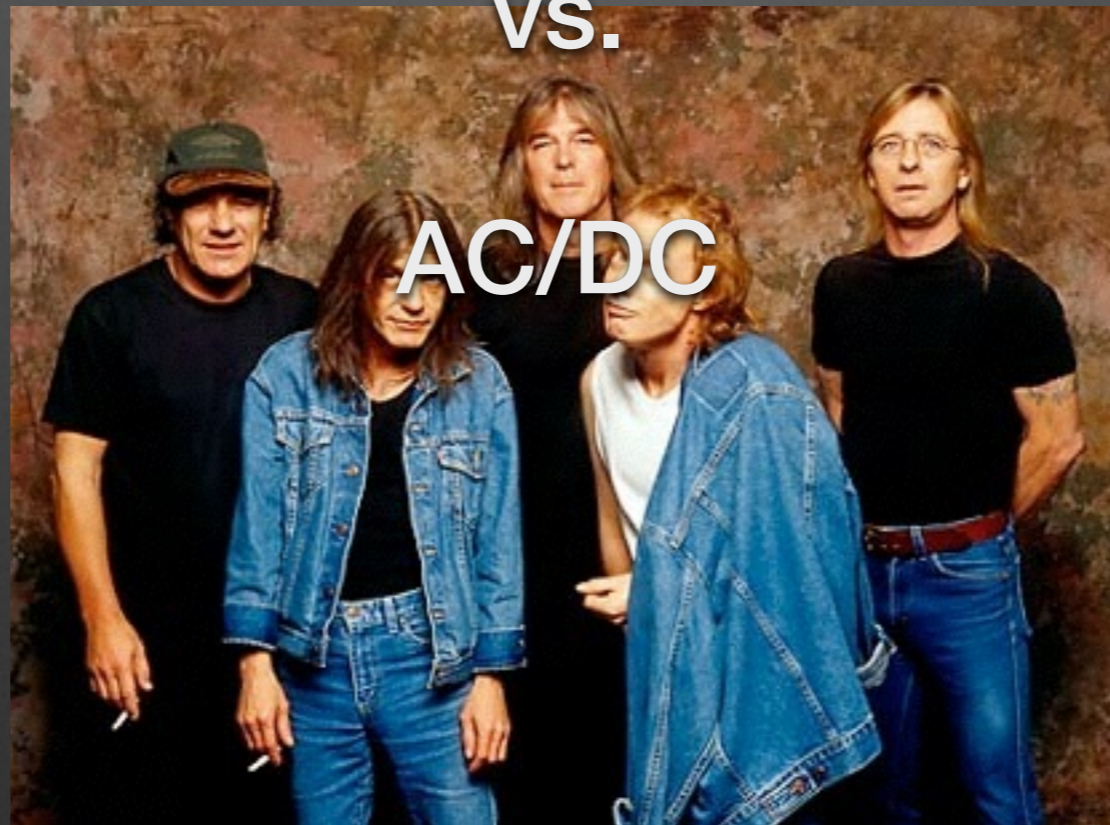
Johnny Cash: cover version/rendition of Nine Inch Nails'
'Hurt'

- Simon Frith (1996): The idea of bad taste as a cultural construction
- Two musical aspects as triggers:
 - Genre centrality in formula music - “judged in the context of or by reference to a critique of mass production” (Frith 1996: 69)
 - Imitative music - the implicit contrast with ‘original’ or, perhaps, ‘individual’ sounds [whereby] a record or artist is dismissed for sounding just like someone else (or, not least, for sounding just like their own earlier records or songs)” (ibid.).
- Musical expressions as sites for deciding where or to whom the music belongs
- Contextually dependent



Celine Dion/Anastacia

vs.

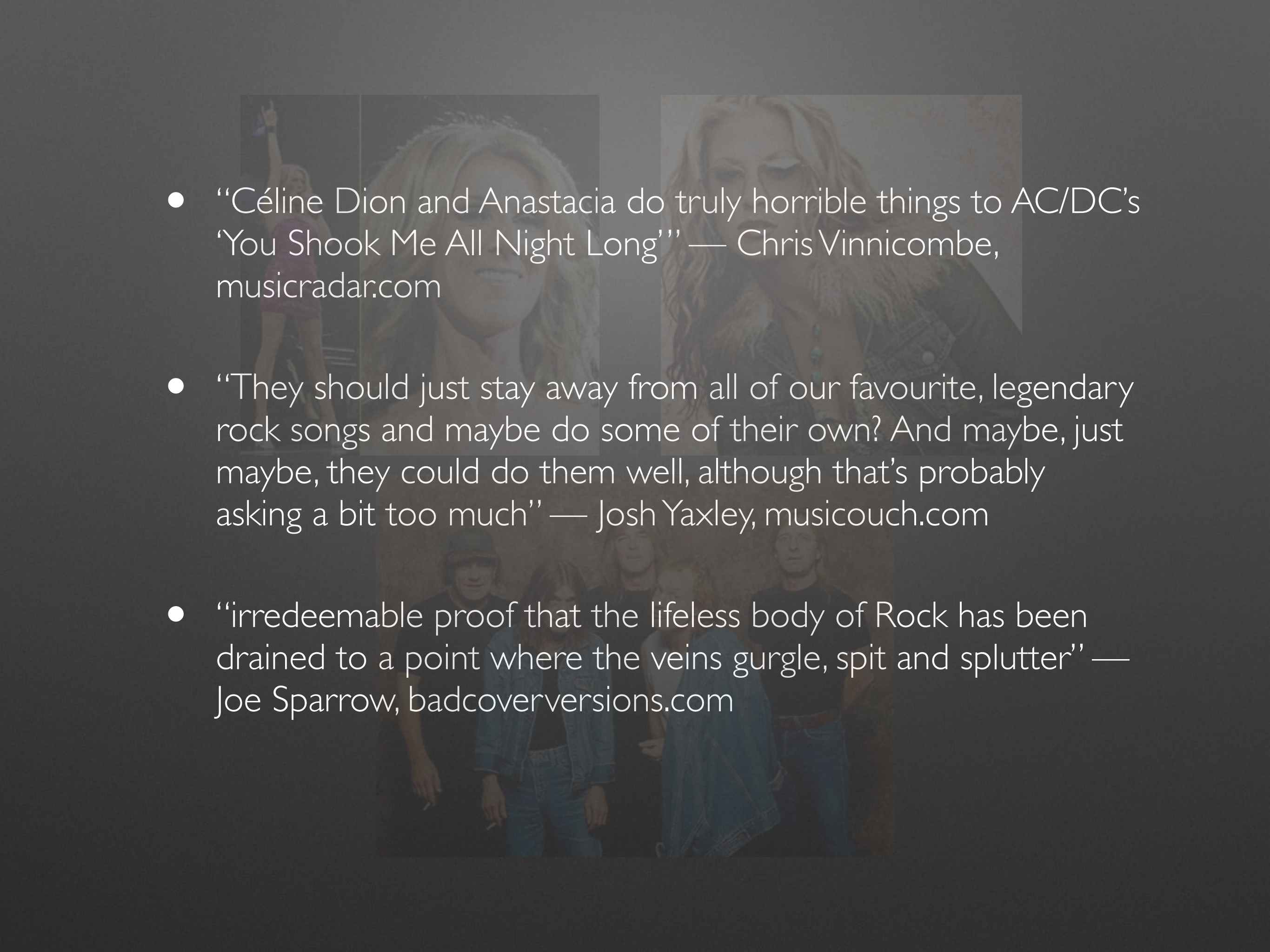


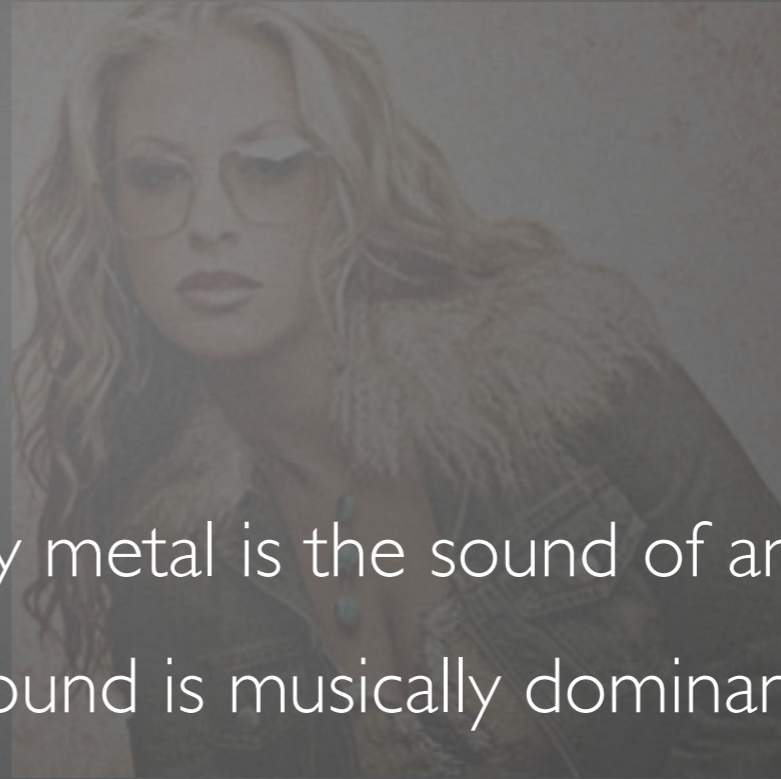
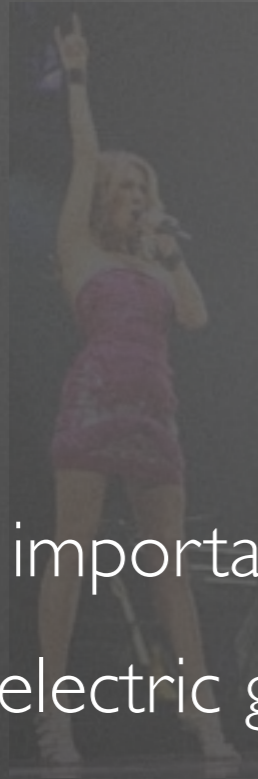
AC/DC



Figure 3.1: Celine Dion performing her rendition of Angus Young's "duck walk".

Celine Dion & Anastacia: 'You Shook Me All Night Long' (2002)

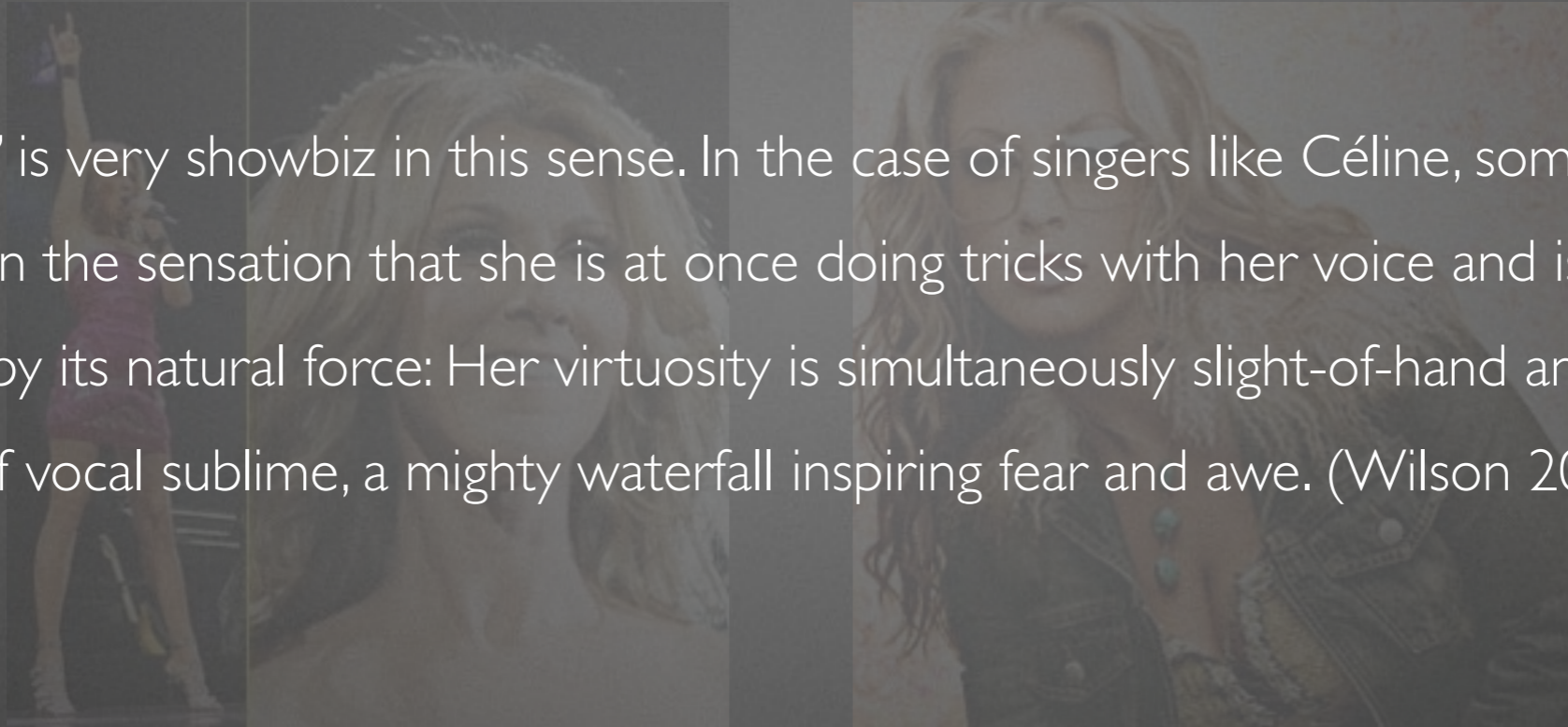
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- “Céline Dion and Anastacia do truly horrible things to AC/DC’s ‘You Shook Me All Night Long’” — Chris Vinnicombe, musicradar.com
 - “They should just stay away from all of our favourite, legendary rock songs and maybe do some of their own? And maybe, just maybe, they could do them well, although that’s probably asking a bit too much” — Josh Yaxley, musicouch.com
 - “irredeemable proof that the lifeless body of Rock has been drained to a point where the veins gurgle, spit and splutter” — Joe Sparrow, badcoverversions.com



The most important aural sign of heavy metal is the sound of an extremely distorted electric guitar. Anytime this sound is musically dominant, the song is either metal or hard rock; any performer that lacks it cannot be included in the genre. (Walser 1993: 41)

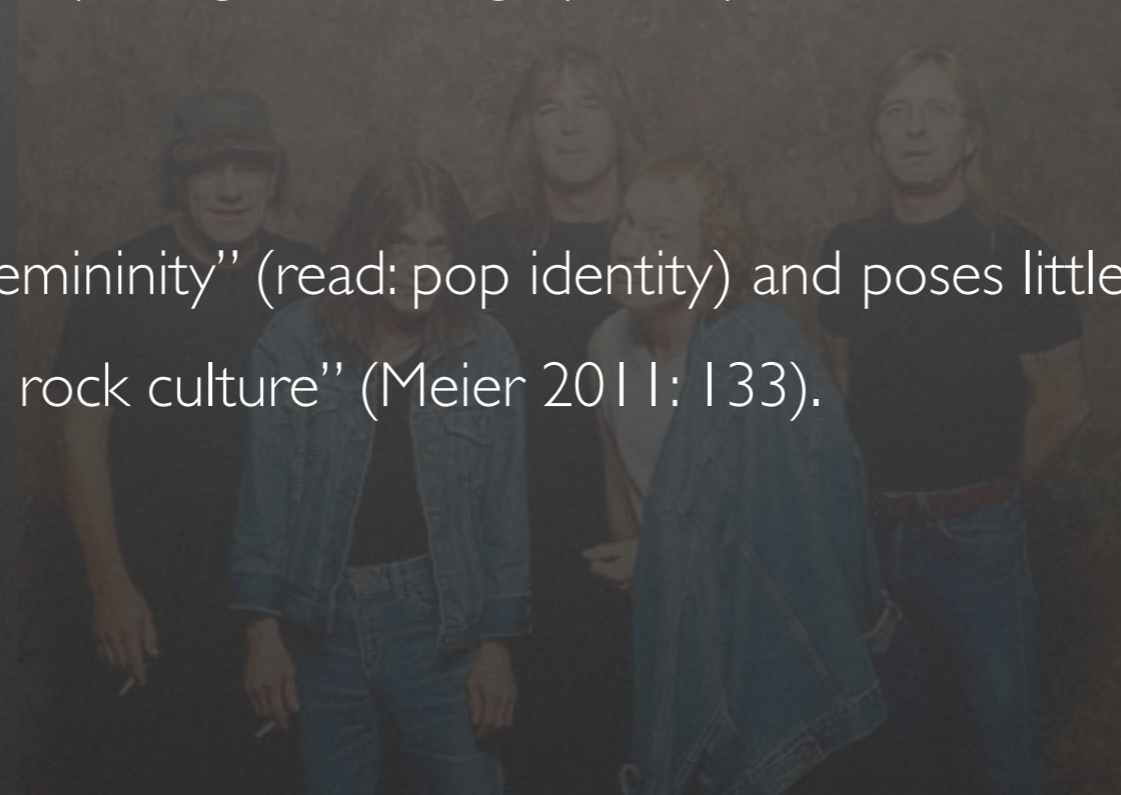


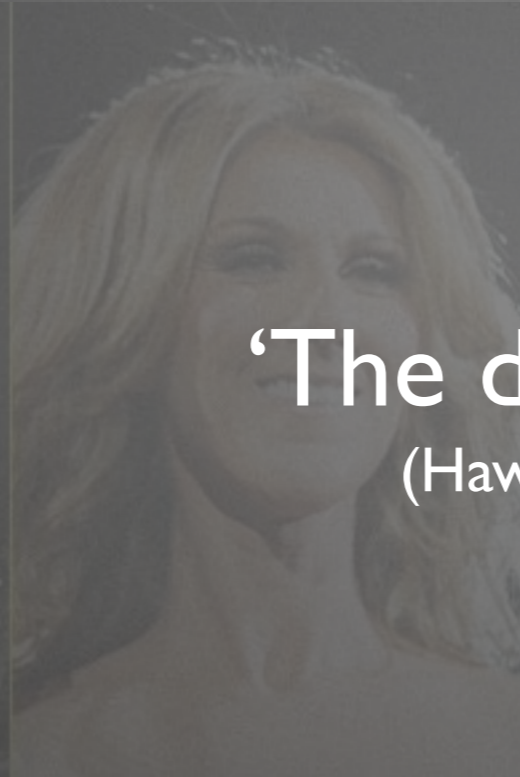
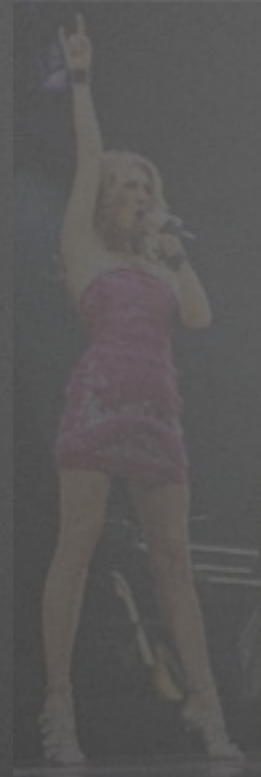
The “big voice” is very showbiz in this sense. In the case of singers like Céline, some of the intoxication is in the sensation that she is at once doing tricks with her voice and is herself overwhelmed by its natural force: Her virtuosity is simultaneously slight-of-hand and somehow real magic, a kind of vocal sublime, a mighty waterfall inspiring fear and awe. (Wilson 2007: 71 ff)



The voice as a marker of the protagonist’s biographical presence in the song

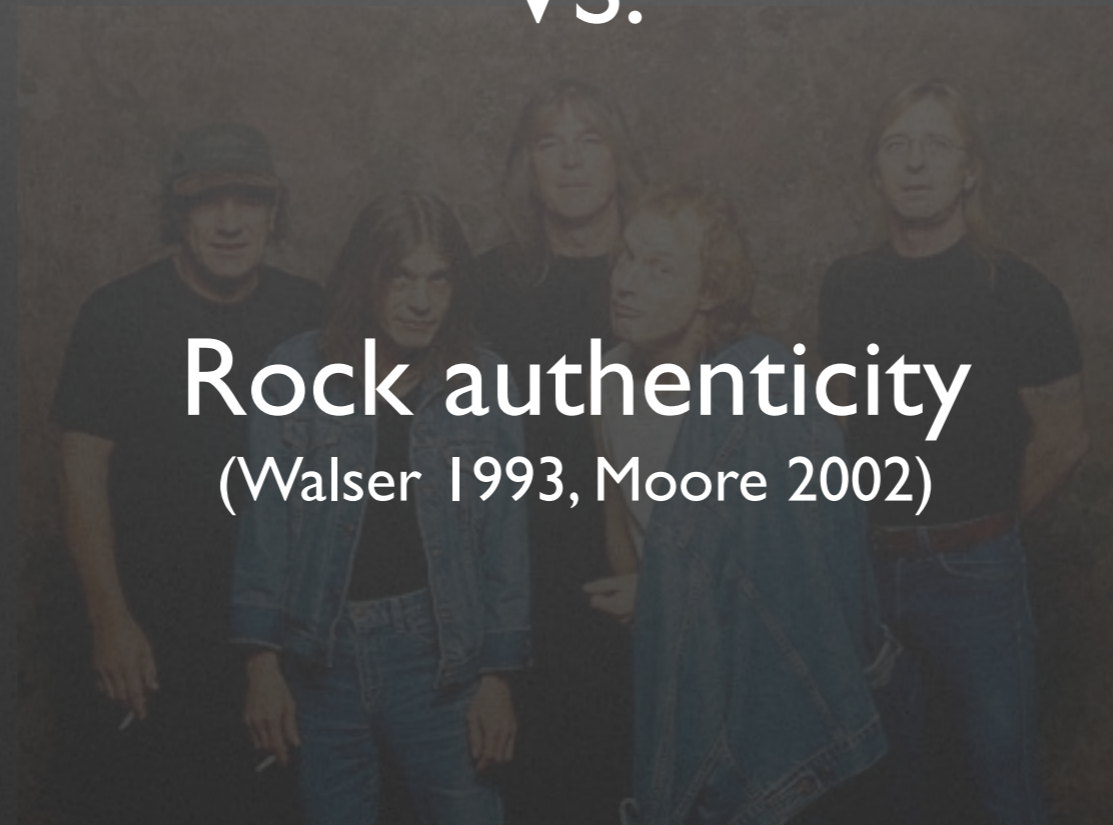
“relatively non-aggressive femininity” (read: pop identity) and poses little threat to the “normative masculinity foundational to rock culture” (Meier 2011: 133).





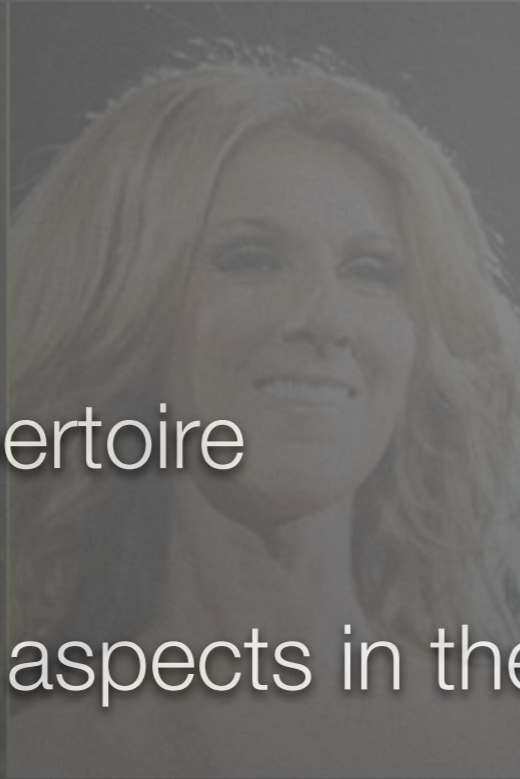
'The diva effect'
(Hawkins 2009)

VS.



Rock authenticity
(Walser 1993, Moore 2002)

- 'Stealing' repertoire
- Non-musical aspects in the forefront
- Insistence of un-replicability
- Is it the cover itself that is in bad taste, or is it in fact the two diva's decision to cover it?



Example 2:
Authenticity and nostalgia
Johnny Cash: 'Hurt' (2002)



Johnny Cash: 'Hurt' (2002)

What kind of mechanisms are at play here?

Authenticity and nostalgia

- Music: A clear break with what was known as the 'boom-chicka boom sound'
- Acoustic guitars and Cash's aging voice at center stage - constructing sonic markers of vulnerability and nostalgia
- Cash offers more than another link in a long chain of cultural tradition: his texts build on familiar cultural tensions but also present a more multifaceted exploration of these issues because they question gender constructions. Cash establishes a heroic working-class masculinity and then explores the uncertainties in that identity. (Edwards 2009: 12)

Authenticity and nostalgia



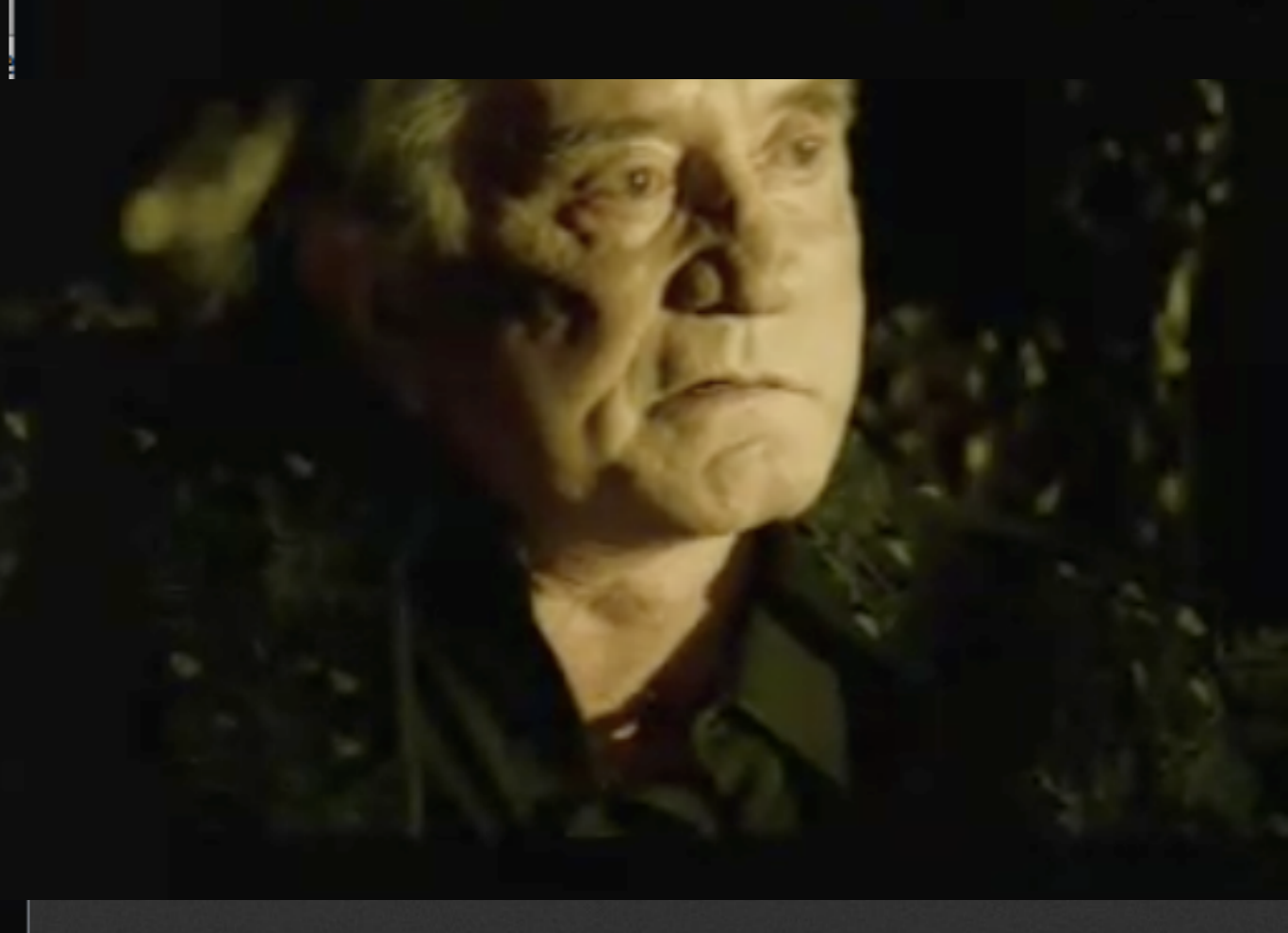
Authenticity and nostalgia

- Performance and production: the peculiarities of the individual performance in recordings
- Reinvention of the song in the process of reinventing himself
- The frailness of his once so powerful baritone voice
- Intimacy through the technological mediation of Cash's voice
- The ultimate impression of an old man with his guitar

Authenticity and nostalgia

- The evocation of Flemish still life paintings
- Spanish: Naturaleza muerta = dead nature







Authenticity and nostalgia

- Cash's voice as the primary sonic marker of authenticity
- Gentle harmonic progressions and guitar arrangements in the beginning, gradually intensifying throughout the song
- “The frail present-day Cash juxtaposed with the virile young star jumping trains, for example, speaks to his charged construction of a Southern white working-class masculinity as it appears in country music, which, again, is in tension in his corpus with a postmodern questioning of identity categories” (Edwards 2010: 61)
- Closeness of the studio production
- Naked arrangements around acoustic guitars
- The Man in Black is still around...

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