Authenticity and *X Factor*: Narratives of Stardom, Background/Aspiration and Performance

If success is to be measured numerically the UK *X Factor* is a triumph of superlatives. An average of 16.55 million viewers tuned in during the two-hour final episode on 11th December 2010[1], making it the most watched programme of the year on British television[2]. The winner, Matt Cardle, sold 439,000 copies of his single in the week following his victory[3] and, according to *The Guardian*, the final weekend of the 2010 series raised £25 million in advertising revenue for its host channel ITV[4].

X Factor is a television format that grew out of 'pop reality' shows *Popstars* (UK, 2001-2) and *Pop Idol* (UK, 2002-3) and was established in 2004. The basic premise of the programme is to 'discover' a new popstar from an ever-dwindling pool of contestants. It begins with the 'auditions' section where the judges (Simon Cowell, Louis Walsh, Dannii Minogue and Cheryl Cole) whittle thousands of auditionees down to a 'top 12'. These twelve acts are divided into four groups with each group assigned to a particular judge as their 'mentor'. The so-called 'live shows' now begins in which each act must sing live every week[5]. Through a mixture of audience voting and judges decisions, one act is sent home every week, eventually leaving one to be crowned *X Factor* champion.

Alongside this phenomenal commercial success, *X Factor* continues to be criticised in much of the UK media. Criticism tends to evoke an Adornian notion of the culture

[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2010/dec/21/top-tv-shows-2010
[2] http://www.barb.co.uk/report/weeklyTopProgrammesOverview?
[3] http://www.nme.com/news/nme/54322
[4] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/dec/08/x-factor-ad-revenues

industry, condemning the show as a commercialised enterprise intent on churning out banal and commoditised art (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944: 121). That the *X Factor* enterprise has achieved great commercial success at the cost of widespread critical scorn reflects Bourdieu's (1993) notion of the inherent tension between cultural and economic capital in artistic production. As Bourdieu suggests, these two sectors exist in an antagonistic yet complementary relation to one another since the accumulation of cultural capital is predicated on the rejection of economic success and vice versa.

However, developments in popular music studies have challenged the assertion that all commercial products are (de)valued equally. There is a long history of debate about claims to 'authenticity' in popular music, and literature has focused largely on the various forms that authenticity can take. Writers have commented on: authenticity as a commercial tool (Frith, 1980); authenticity as defined by fans (Tetzlaff, 1994); authenticity as the opposite of 'fake' (Peterson, 1997); authenticity as ordinariness (Leach, 2001); and authenticity as a form of speaking the truth (Moore, 2002). In this essay I will consider authenticity as realism (Holmes, 2004), although I am less concerned with what authenticity *is* than with what authenticity, or more accurately the deployment of narratives of authenticity, can do.

While it may be useful for analytical reasons to consider *X Factor* as a 'text', in reality the programme is very different from other examples of textual media. *X Factor* is a not just a mediated text but a performed media event constructed explicitly for the viewing pleasure of audiences. As the most successful 'pop-reality' programme in the UK, it has played a key role in both developing and exemplifying the conventions of this new televisual genre. Moreover, now in its seventh series, *X Factor* is bound by its own internal logic and narrative structure, lead by a series of expectations of the programme

that circulate between industry and audience. Thus, tied up in notions of performance, genre and narrative, I would consider *X Factor* as functioning somewhat like a play. The programme provides a symbolic stage on which various narratives are played out by actors each assigned specific roles in the drama[6].

In analysing the seventh series of *X Factor* broadcast between August and December 2010, I will examine the discourses that inhere in the programme and consider their role within the wider narrative structure of the work. In order to accommodate these two levels of analysis I will firstly draw on Foucault (1969) to undertake a discourse of analysis of over 40 hours of footage of the programme (which can be found on YouTube)[7]. This textual analytic method will allow me to consider both the language and visual-imagery of the programme and explore the constructions of meaning within it. Secondly I will draw on Barthes' (1957; 2009: 268) notion of narrative as 'discourse writ-

[6] A summary of the *X Factor* 'dramatic narrative' is as follows: The contestant-subjects are the heroes of the narrative, emerging from obscurity with talent and a desire to be a star. The judge-collective are the villains of the story who stand in the way of the heroes achieving their dream. Within the group of judges, there is a range of character roles, some individuals more completely embodying the role of villain (e.g. Cowell) while others appear more caring (e.g. Cole). As a whole, the judge-collective are built in opposition to the contestant-subjects and studio audience. The studio audience play another key role and react to the narrative as it plays out, uniformly cheering contestant-subjects and booing the judge-collective when they chastise the heroes of the story.

The narrative arc of the story traces the transformation of the contestant-subject into an *X Factor* popstar subject as they gradually achieve their true star potential. Ultimately, only one contestant-subject can complete this narrative journey by being crowned *X Factor* winner. The narrative is largely self-contained such that reactions to the programme in the 'outside world', for example press coverage, are only obliquely referred to and certainly never openly discussed. Other figures with a role in the *X Factor* narrative include the presenter, the creative team, the contestant's families and established popstars who perform on the programme. However, these characters either have a small role to play or are referred to only rarely by one of the other key figures within the programme.

[7] There are thousands of videos on YouTube relating to the X Factor. These can be accessed via the official *X Factor* channel: http://www.youtube.com/show/thexfactor; or via a variety of videos uploaded by fans, see for example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDThipBi_QU

large' to locate *X Factor* discourses within the wider narrative structure of the programme. This will allow me to consider *X Factor* discourses of authenticity not only as constructions of meaning but also as dramatic tools for heightening tension and pleasure.

I will group my analysis around three recurring themes in the programme which I shall refer to as 'stardom', 'background/aspiration' and 'performance', considering how a discourse of authenticity is constructed around the contestant-subject in relation to these three themes. Through the theme of 'stardom', the contestant-subject is constructed as possessing 'innate star essence'; through a theme of 'background' they are painted as 'humble'; and through a theme of 'performance' they are considered both 'real' and 'sincere'. However, running alongside these discourses of authenticity, there exist counter assertions that offer an alternative view of the contestant-subject. Through the themes of 'stardom', 'aspiration' and 'performance' the contestant-subject is presented as 'constructed' 'commercialised' and 'mediatized', potentially undermining the claims to authenticity made previously. I will consider how these seemingly opposing discourses of the *X Factor* contestant-subject at times support each other's claims and at others contradict them. Moreover, I will position these discourses within the wider narrative construction of the programme and consider their role in the dramatic development of the *X Factor* storyline.

Stardom
…as innate star essence

X Factor develops a discourse of authenticity through a framing of stardom as 'innate star essence'. This discourse is regularly articulated by judges when they comment on a contestant's performance:

Simon Cowell: I think that you are special (30th October 2010).

Louis Walsh: …she's got the X Factor…(23rd October 2010).

Simon Cowell: Cher…I think you are a total breath of fresh air (23rd October 2010).

Dannii Minogue: …you are a star Matt (20th November 2010).

Here, the judges suggest that the success of a performance was due to the innate and unique talent of the contestant. As Gamson (1994: 45) observes, the practice of using pseudo-magical terminology to account for fame has its origins in the early 20th century and continues to be of relevance today. This is certainly true within the programme where 'innate star essence' remains indeterminate and referred to through vague allusions to contestants as 'special'. Through a framing of stardom as 'innate star essence' a discourse of authenticity is constructed around the contestant-subjects. Here authenticity it tied to realism such that their 'star quality' is considered legitimate because it is part of the real them; emerging from the 'real' world of their lives before they entered the constructed-for-TV world of *X Factor*.

Louis Walsh: You're a real person, you've got real talent (30th October 2010).

This intertwining of authenticity with realism is reflected in the aesthetic construction of the programme also. As Holmes (2004: 149) points out with reference to *Pop Idol*, the televisual format in *X Factor* shifts from the aesthetic of 'reality TV' in the 'auditions' phase to one of light entertainment in the 'live shows'. Contestant-subjects thus emerge from a "space of ordinariness", their talent materializing from a world of the mundane

and authentic, legitimizing both their position in the programme and, by extension, the status of the programme as committed to discovering 'real talent':

Louis Walsh: You are the heart and soul of the X Factor you are exactly what it says on the tin (23rd October 2010).

…as constructed

Alongside this framing of stardom as 'innate star essence' there is an alternative framing of stardom as 'constructed' suggesting that stardom is manufactured over time:

Simon Cowell: …you remind me of when Leona Lewis was on the show…and I saw someone week after week turn into a star. (30th October 2010).

Simon Cowell: This was the night you turned into a star (23rd October 2010).

Louis Walsh: I think potentially you could be the next big boyband… (9th October 2010).

This framing of stardom as something to be worked on could be explained through a notion of skill building. Indeed, it is not expected that singers come to *X Factor* possessing the full range of skills they need to become a professional artist. It could be that judges refer to the labour of constructing the star in reference to the need to improve their abilities as a performer. However, judges' comments are not *only* about the quality of singing but include observations about choice of song, decisions on hair, make-up, styling and staging. Thus judges' comments refer to producing the star not only as a skilled vocal performer but also as a holistic brand-image, constructed through careful consideration of genre, styling and performance identity:

Cheryl Cole: I love all this going on the little dicky bowtie I think that should be your little thread throughout the show…(13th November 2010).

Simon Cowell: The vocals went off, it looked like you were struggling…parts of the performance by the way were brilliant, I liked the staging I like the look (6th November 2010).

Simon Cowell: ...why would you stick her on that stair to sing that song?…I think how you set the performance tells me if you know what you're talking about or not, I just didn't get that (20th November 2010).

Dannii Minogue: I have to say the make-up was a little bit scary tonight…it was a little bit distracting (30th October 2010).

Moreover, the judges make clear references to a team working behind the artist: referring to creative directors, image stylists and even themselves as mentors and active participants in the process of manufacture.

Louis Walsh: I think Brian Friedman did an incredible job on the staging… (23rd October 2010).

Cheryl Cole: I want to take this opportunity to actually thank you…for allowing me to let myself loose a little bit on there too [referring to Cole's own input into the performance as mentor] (23rd October 2010).

This framing of stardom as 'constructed' appears to undermine the framing of stardom as 'innate star essence' and its concomitant claims to contestant-subject authenticity. While a frame of 'innate star essence' highlights the individual contestant-subject and their inherent talent above all else, a frame of 'constructedness' devalues the contestant-subject, often rendering them passive in the process of manufacture that takes place around them. The following quote details a heated discussion about a performance by John Adeleye featuring two dancers onstage:

Dannii Minogue: …what were those dancers doing on the stage they were so distracting…John don't let him [his mentor Louis Walsh] do that to you again…
Cheryl Cole: John…you always deliver your vocals really well and that's all you need to do, the rest of it is up to Louis so don't you worry about that side of it
Simon Cowell: …You were singing the horrible song Louis gave you…It's one of the weirdest things I've ever seen in my life, it's not your fault but when you watch it back… (23rd October 2010).

Adeleye is left standing awkwardly onstage while the decisions of his 'branding' are discussed around him. Cole even suggests that Adeleye's only job is to "deliver your vocals really well" as all the other aspects of his performance – the hair, styling, staging etc – will be decided by one of the team of individuals working behind him, of which his mentor (Louis Walsh) is the figurehead. The suggestion is that Adeleye is a passive figure in the process of establishing his brand as a performer since Cowell informs him that it is "not your fault".

Frames of stardom within the *X Factor* text as on the one hand 'innate star essence', and on the other hand 'constructed', seem to exist in an oppositional relationship to one another. While the notion of 'innate star essence' foregrounds the contestant and their inherent star-quality, a concept of 'constructedness' emphasises the role of those working behind the artist to create their successful brand-image. This conflict between seemingly opposing discourses is productive within the dramatic narrative of the programme as it produces the *X Factor* popstar subject - the ultimate role to which all contestant-subjects aspire.

Constructing the *X Factor* Popstar Subject

Within the narrative, the *X Factor* popstar subject is characterized as a simultaneously talented individual and object of a successful system of branding and manufacture. When a performance is deemed particularly effective, judges consider the contestant-subject as displaying their ability to eventually 'become' an *X Factor* popstar subject. Although they have not yet achieved this final transformation, stand-out performances are considered as moments when the contestant-subjects' potential to embody the contradictions of this future role (as both inherently talented and ultimately constructed) are displayed. For example, Minogue compliments the staging and styling of a performance:

Dannii Minogue: Tonight this felt like you…this is what you would do at your concert, the staging of it was incredible, love the way you look (23rd October 2010).

Yet she suggests that these 'constructed' elements were successful because they represented and matched the ultimate innate star quality of the contestant: "this felt like you". Further, Walsh attributes successful decisions on genre and styling to the individual performer and her "attitude":

Louis Walsh: Cher I thought you were taking a really really big risk…but you know what, you were right to take the risk because it so worked and it's so you, you've got great attitude and swagger… (16th October 2010).

Thus, when a contestant-subject delivers a highly regarded performance, considered as displaying their future potentiality as an *X Factor* popstar subject, positive aspects of the performance relating to staging, styling and make-up are attributed to the innate star quality of the contestant regardless of whether they had anything to do with the actual decision-making process. Here the future *X Factor* popstar subject is constructed as one who through their exceptional talent and innate essence of stardom, positively embodies every aspect of the complex system of branding that is constructed around them. Since this role in the narrative is formed out of the co-existence of frames of stardom as 'innate star essence' *and* stardom as 'constructed', the *X Factor* popstar subject treads a fine line between realism and constructedness, talent and manufacture; acknowledging the nature of the popstar brand as a commodity while never fully rejecting the romanticized notion of the triumph of 'real' talent.

Background/Aspiration
…as humble

X Factor also develops a discourse of authenticity through a framing of contestant backgrounds as 'humble'. 'Humbleness' is built through references to contestants' lives 'before' the *X Factor* contest, referring to their home life, class, regionality and other 'realist' markers of their background.

Rebecca Ferguson: I live in Liverpool with my kids Lily-May and Carl… (9th October 2010).

Mary Byrne: I live in a two bedroomed house with me and my daughter…a few months ago I was still serving my customers at the till (9th October 2010).

Byrne's references to her small house and job in a supermarket stand as markers of her working-class background. Moreover, Ferguson's comments denote her status as a single mother living in the north of England, occupying a societal position associated with a lack of inherited privilege. Through a framing of the contestant-subject as humble, a discourse of authenticity is constructed around them that is tied to realism. As Byrne and Ferguson tell us about their lives, viewers are also offered the chance to 'see' their world. Thus their comments are accompanied by images of Ferguson at home with her children and Byrne working at her supermarket till. These images are presented in the style of 'flashback' such that they suggest the 'former' life of the contestant; the 'real' world from which they emerged before entering the 'constructed' world of *X Factor*.

…as fame and commercial success

Running alongside this framing of contestant-subject backgrounds as 'humble' is a counter notion of contestant-subject aspirations as defined by 'fame and commercial success'. This is most explicitly articulated by the judges who reaffirm that they are looking for a commercially viable artist:

Louis Walsh: We're looking for…someone who's going to go on and sell millions and millions of records (30th October 2010).

Dannii Minogue: You've shown us that…if we go to see your tour there's versatility in what you do (20th November 2010).

Simon Cowell: It felt like you were someone who'd had five hit records and just came back with your hit single (23rd October 2010).

References to "tours", "hit singles" and selling "millions" of records suggest that markers of economic capital are both evident and valued within the programme. As such, contestants are highly praised for their ability to emulate artists who have achieved success in these terms:

Simon Cowell: What was really good is….you're like Gwen Stefani or something like that (30th October, 2010).

Louis Walsh: You are a little Luther Vandross and she turned you into karaoke. You're better than this (13th November, 2010).

This framing of contestant aspirations as defined by 'fame and commercial success' seems to contradict the discourse of authenticity constructed through a framing of backgrounds as 'humble'. Ideological associations of commercialsm with inauthenticity in music have a long history and are most explicitly stated in the work of Adorno (1941). Adorno's damning analysis of popular music concluded that capitalist systems of production were antithetical to the essentials of art and thus any music produced in this way was utterly oppressive. Adorno's critique of popular music has remained particularly influential with regard to discussions of authenticity both within the academy and amongst fans and audiences (see Frith, 2004: 328; Hamm, 1995; Leach, 2001: 144).

The co-existence of these frames of background as 'humble' and aspiration as based on 'fame and commercial success,' is key to the dramatic narrative of the programme and produces the central characters of contestant-subject and judge-collective.

Constructing the Judge-Collective

While a frame of 'fame and commercial success' is clearly present in the programme, it is never articulated by the contestant-subjects and is referred to only by the judge-collective. That references to fame are only made by the judge-collective, allows for the construction of these characters as 'agents of the music industry' and therefore villains in the wider *X Factor* narrative. The judge-collective function as gatekeepers of the popular music industry, commending or chastising performances and allowing or refusing contestant entry. The contestant-subjects, studio audience (who greet all judges' criticisms with a chorus of boos and respond to contestants' attempts to defend their performances with great applause) and by extension audience at home all come to be constructed as 'against' the judge-collective (see also Holmes, 2004: 165). This structure ensures that the potentially damaging discourses of inauthenticity associated with commerciality are absorbed by the judge-collective who are caricatured as part of amusic industry commonly characterised as a "ruthless corporate machine" (Negus, 1996: 18; see also Adorno, 1941).

Constructing the Contestant-Subject

On the other hand, framings of background as 'humble' are regularly articulated by the contestant-subjects. This constructs the contestant-subject as one who has earned the right to be elevated from their position of low status to one of greater cultural value. Interestingly, however, within the narrative construction of *X Factor*, self-improvement and commercial success are often synonymous. Thus while contestant-subjects may never articulate frames of aspiration as based on 'fame and commercial success', their desire to self-improve within the *X Factor* narrative inherently implies this. The narrative of the programme presents the *only* means of increasing one's social status and acquiring a position of prestige as winning the contest itself. Hence, Louis Walsh implores viewers

to vote for contestant Mary Byrne because, "I don't want this to end for you tonight. I don't want you back in the supermarket" (27th November 2010). Here it is assumed that if Byrne does not win the *X Factor* contest she will remain a low-paid supermarket worker. There is no recognition of Byrne's own ability to gain higher status through, for example, returning to education to gain better qualifications. Ultimately, winning the life-changing *X Factor* prize is the *only* means by which Byrne can elevate herself from her low-status position.

Constructions of the judge-collective as villains and the contestant-subjects as heroes are key to the narrative development of the programme. This is because it dramatizes a tale of 'rags to riches' and in doing so says something about contemporary working life in the UK. A closer look at the narrative structure of the programme reveals this: contestant-subjects within the *X Factor* are constructed as humble and often working class; their position within the programme is consistently unstable requiring them to habitually re-present their abilities to the judges as 'agents of the industry'; only one individual may emerge triumphant as the *X Factor* winner and to do so they must eliminate all other rivals; and to achieve success, contestants must alter their selfhood as the judges request in order to fit into the system of labour to which they are hoping to gain entry. *X Factor* therefore makes a spectacle of the commodification of labour in modern capitalism, literally dramatizing, as Redden (2008: 22) notes, "the selection, reward and performance management" of workers. Moreover the narrative reflects a wider notion of 'meritocracy' that has taken on particular relevance in the UK since the advent of New Labour in the 1990s. Outlined by Anthony Giddens in 'The Third Way' (1998), a system of meritocracy encourages exceptional members of society to 'rise to the top' of their chosen field in a climate of equal opportunity. This state is dramatically represented in the *X Factor* text where talented individuals from all backgrounds aspire towards self-improvement. Thus,

when contestant-subjects do refer to their aspirations within the music industry, they tend to enact meritocratic narratives of self-improvement and hardwork:

Katie Waissel: I have tried to make it in the music industry…I had doors shut in my face but nothing's ever easy that's worth fighting for (6th November 2010).

Matt Cardle: I wanna win it…and I've dedicated enough of my life to it to deserve it I think. I did hundreds of jobs to earn money to do the music…(6th November 2010).

The *X Factor* narrative therefore depicts the struggle of contestant-subjects as workers striving constantly towards self-improvement in a system of meritocratic modern capitalism to which the judges stand as gatekeepers[8].

[8] Stahl (2004) also notes narratives of meritocracy in the US pop-reality programme *American Idol*.

Performance
…as real

The *X Factor* text also develops a discourse of authenticity through a framing of performance as 'real'. This is produced through references to the performance as both 'live' and 'emotionally sincere'.

The programme continually reaffirms that all contestants are singing live each week. Framings of 'liveness' within *X Factor* produce a discourse of 'authenticity' based on a notion of the live performance as neither commodified nor reproducible, standing in direct opposition to charges of manufacture and profit-oriented constructedness in popular music (Attali, 1985: 41; Tetzlaff 1994: 105). Authenticity is here tied to realism such that judges regularly allude to the 'live' performance as an opportunity for the contestant to display their 'real talent' as a singer:

Simon Cowell: This is you stripped back bare, no gimmicks (20th November 2010).

Cheryl Cole: Tonight she's going to show everybody she can really, really sing (30th October 2010).

Louis Walsh: Tonight Cher you proved that you really can sing (30th October 2010).

Performances are framed as 'real' not only because of their 'liveness' but also because of their 'emotional sincerity'. Performances are designated especially successful when a contestant is deemed to have 'emotionally connected' to the music and shared a part of themselves with the audience:

Simon Cowell: What I love about you is that I actually feel that you mean the words of the song (20th November 2010).

Cheryl Cole: That absolutely blew me away that was amazing. I felt every single word that you said (6th November 2010).

This discourse of authenticity is particularly tied to realism such that contestant-subjects'

declarations of emotional sincerity are said to reveal something about the 'real' them (see also Moore, 2002: 214).

Cheryl Cole: I respect you as an artist and I believe every word that you say and…I truly believe in your performance (23rd October 2010).

Simon Cowell: You've shown actually the person you really are which is actually you're a very sweet nice girl… (20th November 2010).

Assertions of 'emotional sincerity' produce a discourse of authenticity as a dramatic illustration of wider shifts in the status of public figures in contemporary society. As Sennett (1977) and Thompson (1995; 2000) have pointed out, contemporary public figures (such as politicians) are increasingly expected to self-disclose in order to gain public trust and justify their continued state of high visibility in the media (Thompson, 2000: 40). This reflects the ongoing erosion of the boundary between the 'private' and the 'public' and also the increasing reliance of public figures on symbolic capital as 'trust' and 'reputation'. This experience of politicians in the modern public sphere mirrors that of contestants within the *X Factor*. While politicians self-disclose in order to build up reserves of symbolic capital and trust which can then be converted into votes, contestants within the *X Factor* text enact 'emotional sincerity' through performance in order to build up reserves of symbolic capital as authenticity that can then be converted into viewer votes.

…as mediatized

Alongside this framing of performance as 'real' as a result of both its 'liveness' and 'emotional sincerity' there exists an alternative and potentially contradictory narrative of performance as 'mediatized.' As Holmes (2004: 158) notes, the 'live shows' section of *X Factor* embodies the aesthetic of a professional pop performance through the use of multiple video screens, pyrotechnics, stage lighting, dry ice and various set pieces. In

many performances, prerecorded images of the contestant are projected onto video screens at the back of the stage (see below):

Cher Lloyd's performance 30th October 2010.

Here Lloyd is wearing the same clothes and make up in the pre-recorded video as she is in the live performance. Equally, the aesthetic of the video reflects that of the live performance through the synchronicity between the onstage chair of bare twisted branches and the tree to which Lloyd clings in the video. That the video screens show the audience a prerecorded version of a performance that they are simultaneously watching live undermines the framing of performance as 'live' and its concomitant claims to authenticity. It is pertinent to note, as Auslander (2006) points out, that it is very common for contemporary pop performances to blur the line between the 'live' and the 'mediatized' in this way. As such, many stage performances today come to resemble music videos and audience members expect performers to 'sound like the CD' when they hear them live. Yet, I would point out that by simultaneously presenting narratives of performance as 'real' and 'mediatized', *X Factor* undermines its own discourses of

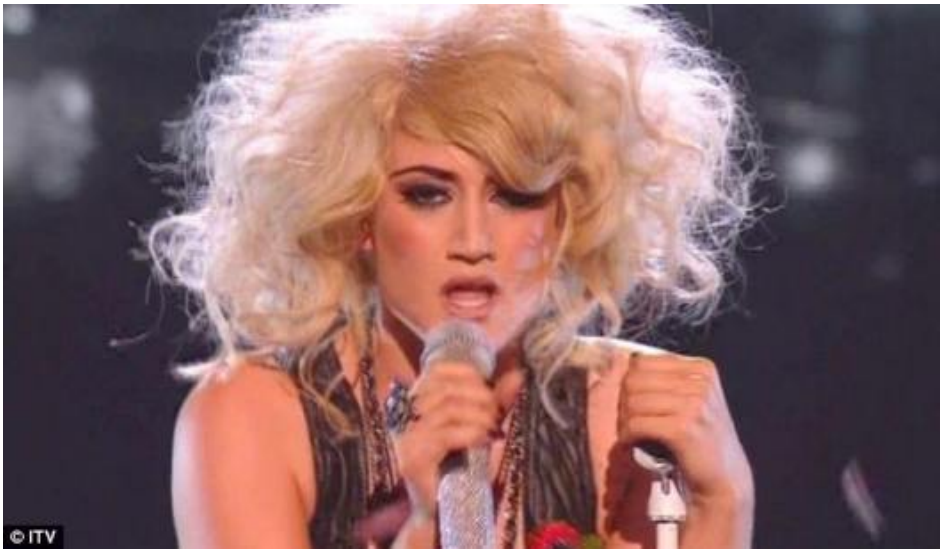
authenticity that pertain to live performance as realism.

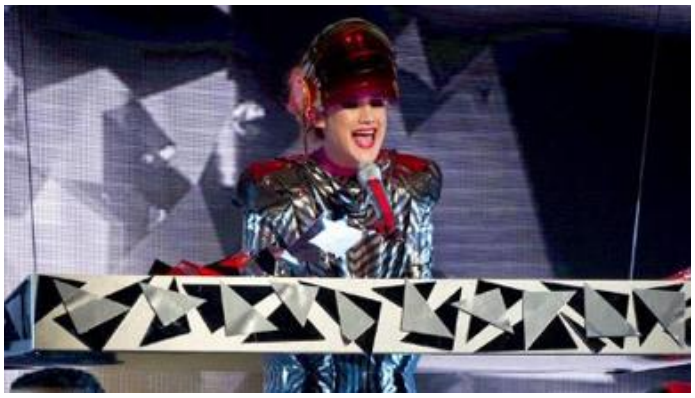
Narratives of performance as 'mediatized' not only shatter the myth of live performance as a unique event in time but also as a ritual in which sincere emotions are shared between musician and audience. Every song performed in the 'live shows' section is based on the 'theme' for the episode of that week. Themes have included genres such as 'rock' or 'club classics' and broader classifications such as 'guilty pleasures' or 'number one singles'. It is this fluid relationship to genre that undermines narratives of the *X Factor* performance as emotionally sincere.

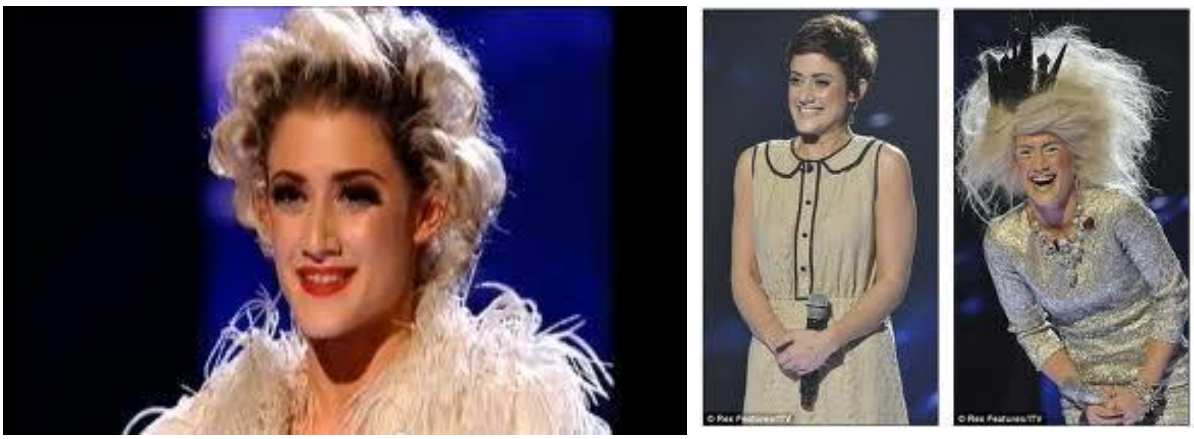
Frith's (1987) early work on rock and pop music helps illustrate how the aesthetic and discursive limits of genre play a key role in defining the boundaries of emotional sincerity in popular music. As Frith (1987: 136) points out the 'rock myth' depends crucially on the claim of rock music to express sincere emotions. Within a rock genre, sincerity is represented through authentic expression, either of the lived experience of the musician and the reality of the community they come to represent, or the creative vision of the artist. The rock aesthetic is built explicitly in opposition to a notion of pop music as devoid of any genuine emotion. Inauthentic pop is thus characterised by its falsehood and authentic rock by its search for truth; while rock expresses something, pop expresses nothing. It is pertinent to note that the boundaries between popular music genres have become increasingly porous in recent years and so Frith's dichotomy between pop and rock is perhaps of decreasing relevance. However, the point remains that claims to emotional sincerity are generically themed and often built explicitly in opposition to other genres in popular music. Thus claims to emotional sincerity within a song from a country genre are likely to be very different from that contained in a blues or rock oeuvre. Moreover, this relation is often directly mapped onto notions of cultural value

such that the emotional claims inherent within one genre are deemed of lesser value in another generic context. As Frith (1987: 136) puts it, "good music is the authentic expression of something…bad music is inauthentic, it expresses nothing." I would counter that no music 'expresses nothing', it is rather that 'bad music' is designated as such because its emotional content is deemed of no cultural value within that context. Thus, claims to emotional sincerity in popular music are bound by genre: dictated both by the aesthetic and discursive limits of the style and by their oppositional relationship to other musical forms.

Within *X Factor* the complex relation between genre and authenticity is overlooked in favour of a notion of genre as a tool for heightening entertainment. Weekly themes allow contestants to dress up in a number of increasingly absurd outfits, trying on a new music persona each week with the hope of surprising audience members with their extraordinary and continuous transformation. Images of Katie Waissel below depict her metamorphosis between various *X Factor* personas. Here *X Factor* reveals itself not as a unique or sincere performance moment but as a thoroughly mediatized event: an event that is created *specifically* in order to be watched by television audiences and which tests the boundaries of the bizarre in order to encourage audience pleasure. Here, a narrative of performance as 'mediatized' directly contradicts narratives of performance as 'emotionally sincere' that make claims to authenticity within the programme.







Katie Waissel for performances themed: (clockwise from top) 'rock', 'number one singles', 'Halloween', 'songs by the Beatles', 'guilty pleasures'.

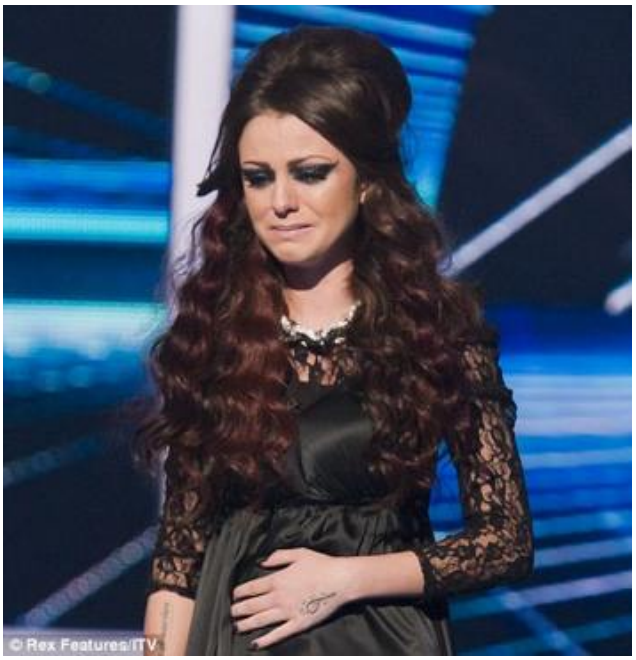
Producing Dramatic Tension

It is at the collision between framings of performance as on the one hand 'real' and on the other hand 'mediatized' that much of the dramatic tension of the programme is

produced. A closer analysis of Cher Lloyd's 30th October performance illustrates this. As the lights come up she is revealed hovering above a thick carpet of dry ice, floating across the stage like a phantom and gradually bathing it in light as she moves, her voice soaring hauntingly above her body on the stage. Here is Lloyd the performer, the popstar, the mediatized image of stardom and spectacle, drenched in make up and shrouded in haze and smoke. Then as the performance ends and she takes her place at the front of the stage to receive her critique, we are suddenly confronted by a different Lloyd, the 17 year-old girl waiting anxiously to receive the approval of those she so deeply wants to impress. Overcome with emotion she begins to cry and suddenly looks too young and fragile to be onstage; her hair, make-up and wardrobe now appear ludicrous, weighing down her small frame. Here we see Lloyd shed her aura of 'mediatized popstar', leaving only the 'real'[9].

Of course neither of these personas necessarily bear any resemblance to the Lloyd of everyday life and audiences are acutely aware of contestant-subjects' ability to manipulate an image of themselves in order to elicit sympathy and votes. Both the 'mediatized' and the 'real' image of Lloyd are essentially performed and therefore highly managed identities. Yet the interaction between these personas plays a key role in the wider *X Factor* dramatic narrative. As Hill (2002) suggests, viewers of reality TV genres gain pleasure in being presented with the "moment of truth" in a highly constructed environment; discovering the 'real' contestant-subject underneath all the layers of constructedness. Thus the creative interaction between framings of performance as both 'real' and 'mediatized' plays a key role in the wider narrative of *X Factor* and relates directly to its status as part of a 'reality TV' genre.

[9] A video of Lloyd's performance:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17wPqx2tEpw&feature=fvst



Cher Lloyd: the 'mediatized' (left) and 'real' (right) personas.

Concluding Comments

To conclude, the *X Factor* dramatic narrative is produced through the co-existence of and interaction between alternate discourses of authenticity and inauthenticity. Through the theme of stardom the *X Factor* popstar subject is produced as simultaneously authentic, by virtue of their innate talent, and inauthentic, since they are the subject of a complex system of manufacture and branding. Through the theme of background/aspiration, the roles of the contestant-subject and judge-collective are brought into being, acting respectively as workers and gatekeepers within a meritocratic system of capitalism represented by the programme. And through a theme of performance much of the dramatic tension of the show is produced, allowing viewers to gain pleasure from searching for the moment of 'truth' amongst the layers of construction. *X Factor* playfully mines the opposition between discourses of authenticity and inauthenticity in commercial pop music and creates a highly successful dramatic narrative out of this opposition. Consequently, media voices who deride the programme for its inauthenticity are missing the point since without discourses of the inauthentic, the programme could not function.

Although my analysis has focused exclusively on the *X Factor* programme and its own internal narrative, the findings of this essay are relevant to studies of popular music more generally. An analysis of *X Factor* sheds light on the ways in which discourses of authenticity and inauthenticity are selectively deployed as a means of valuing commercial music. The shifting relationship between these codes of value within the *X Factor* suggests that in commercial pop, discourses of authenticity and inauthenticity do not necessarily exist in a complementary and antagonistic relation to each other. That is, the authenticity of artist-as-brand is not necessarily predicated on their *lack of* inauthenticity.

Seemingly opposing discourses can co-exist within the persona of a commercial performer and strains of inauthenticity may in fact add to their characterization within a wider narrative context.

The concept of 'narrative' is also an important concern and applying this conceptualisation to the commercial pop industry more generally may also prove fruitful. The commercial pop industry is indeed a real and functioning global business, employing hundreds of thousands of individuals and making billions of dollars for those at the top of the ladder: that is to say, the industry exists in the cold hard reality of commercial profit. Yet on the other hand, commercial pop is a fabricated world of narrative and play; a highly managed show featuring an array of characters, storylines and plots of which audience members are increasingly aware. The show features heroes, villains, rebels, icons, sex-objects and many more. Instead of focusing on the fabricated nature of commercial pop music, future research could benefit from considering the complex threads of narrative that make up this highly successful form of music-making.

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