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Authenticity and Artifice in Rock and Roll: “And I Guess That I Just Don’t Care”

Bernardo Alexander Attias

*Musicians, journalists and academics often hold up the Velvet Underground as the paragon of authenticity in rock music, and the band indeed portrayed itself this way from the outset. While much ink has been spilled explaining the original and authentic genius that is the Velvet Underground, an equally compelling case can be made that the band’s first album marked a turn towards insincerity and inauthenticity in popular music. This project emerges from the tension between these identities. A close textual analysis of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* functions as an entry into theoretical arguments about truth and meaning in popular music. I contend that much of the discourse about authenticity in popular music is hampered by the assumption that artifice and authenticity are incompatible. I propose that we instead examine these discourses as themselves signifiers that can be manipulated by artists. The Velvets’ first album produces meaning precisely through this dialectical tension in a manner made possible only through its mediation in the commodity form.*

Much has changed in rock music studies since the mid-1980s, when Simon Frith called for a category of popular music criticism to bridge the gap between “high theory” as was generally practiced by British scholars and the “empirical studies” that were more common across the pond (Shepherd 306). This third category, “low theory,” reflects, as John Shepherd puts it, the “nascent, common-sense theory through which popular musicians, record industry personnel, rock journalists and consumers make sense of and legitimate their worlds” (306). In the intervening 30 years, we have seen the emergence of an entire field of popular music studies, with all the associated institutional and professional apparatus that accompanies any academic discipline, including journals, organizations, conferences, archives, and even the occasional tenure-track position.

In the mid-1980s I was an undergraduate student who knew nothing of Frith or his call for low theory. What I did know was that I was discovering the music of the Velvet Underground. Polygram had just re-released *The Velvet Underground &*

Nico, and I, like many of my friends, had this record on heavy rotation. I had heard of Lou Reed before and was already familiar with Nico's voice on "Femme Fatale," but it was not until 1985 that I heard the album from start to finish. I had already been exposed to punk, industrial, and new wave, and "college rock" was already a thing; indeed, by that point Brian Eno's well known comment about the record's influence was three years old, and I had already heard a good number of the bands he was referring to. Nevertheless, the record sounded utterly new to me—raw, primal, forceful, enchanting, and real—in a way that made me completely rethink my understanding of rock and roll.

Thirty years later the album still packs some of that punch. My 1985 reissue languishes on a shelf in a home-made record cover after the original was destroyed in a flood, but in the intervening years I have managed to collect several different copies of various iterations of the album, including the 1968 reissue and the 2000 yellow vinyl reissue that I am playing in the background as I type. Just moments ago, my partner's younger sister, a 22-year-old hip-hop fan who had never heard of the Velvets before today, remarked to me as "Venus in Furs" came on that she really liked its groove. She was surprised to learn the album was first released in 1967. Many Velvets fans can recount similar experiences of introducing new listeners to their music. Beck, for example, commented that, when he first heard the song in the 1980s, "I'd never heard anything like it. It was like hearing something I'd always wanted to hear. It felt so modern—I had to look at the back of the record to make sure it wasn't a newer band" (qtd in Vozick-Levinson).

Not surprisingly, it is this question of truth that orients my thinking regarding the Velvet Underground. The question of authenticity plays a central role in the history of cultural studies generally and popular music studies specifically. And of course rock music, even at its most commercial and contrived, has always foregrounded its relationship to authenticity—such a claim perforce underlies any notion of rock music as "a vehicle for aesthetic and social liberation" (Burns 1). And few bands, particularly in the late 1960s, have made authenticity such a central component of their public identity as did the Velvet Underground.

In 1987, Lou Reed told music executive Joe Smith that he felt the purpose of the Velvets was "to elevate the rock & roll song and take it where it hadn't been taken before" (qtd in Grow n.p.). Reed always portrayed the five-album career of the Velvets as a noble tragedy in the classical sense; it is with good reason that Steve Hamelman began his obituary of Reed in these pages with Aristotle (53). For Reed, as for most rock historians, the Velvets represented something both brand new and quite ancient in the world of art: a bold and authentic experiment in raw feeling which burst onto a commercial 1960s rock-and-roll scene that had already come to be dominated by the insincere sentiment of the greeting card.

This, anyway, is the legend, and it is a legend that Reed and the Velvets have been all too happy to continue to promote. It is a legend that continues to animate

discussions of the band's influence. In the wake of Lou Reed's death in 2013, commentators frequently counterposed the band's authenticity to the crass commercialism of pop music. Suzanne Moore, for example, suggests that "[h]is death made us remember the music that made us want to leave our small towns and our small lives, a time when transgression was not simply a marketing technique" (n.p.). Implicit in much of this discourse is a working construct of musical authenticity rooted in three main beliefs: the originality of their ideas, the truth of their experience, and their disdain for commercialism.

Few would argue that the Velvets were not original in terms of their ideas or the sound of their music.¹ Many discussions of originality focus on Lou Reed's lyrics (which infamously dwelt on themes of drugs, decadence, and kinky sex at a time when the Beatles were singing "All You Need Is Love"). While one can argue that the topics themselves were not really new at all—Reed himself acknowledged that he was writing in the tradition of Beat poets and other literary figures, and, while such themes were hardly a staple of popular music in the 1960s, they certainly had been broached before—there was something "ballsy" (Harvard 18) about a band making these topics central to their identity.² And sonically the Velvet Underground brought a kind of minimalist avant-garde classical sensibility to rock and roll, laying the groundwork for punk and noise rock in the ensuing decades. Reed's "Ostrich-tuned" guitar sounds combined with John Cale's droning violas and the stripped-down, occasionally tribal drums of Maureen Tucker defined a sonic signature that continues to inspire today's rockers and musicians nearly 50 years later. It is almost as if every decade's rockers must rediscover that first Velvets album.³ But it is really the next two claims regarding the Velvets' authenticity—that their work related the "truth" of their experiences and that the band defiantly eschewed commercial appropriation throughout their short musical career—that may shed the most light on the notion of authenticity in rock music. While I hope to avoid, in the words of Gary Burns, the "ostentatious displays of theoryspeak and technobabble [that] wrench the music too far away from its audience" (1), a brief elaboration of the notion of authenticity as it has developed in popular music studies may help elucidate what we still have to learn from *The Velvet Underground & Nico*.

Theorizing Authenticity

About a decade after Frith's call for the practice of low theory in popular music studies, Sarah Thornton explored the concept of authenticity ethnographically in her well-known work on London's club cultures. She called on Walter Benjamin's canonical discussion of the concept of the demise of the "aura" in the 20th-century work of art to frame her discussion. Benjamin had sketched out the aesthetic and political implications of film as an art form materially designed for mass reproduction. For Benjamin a work of art designed for reproduction sacrifices its physical relationship to the artist and therefore its aura. The aura is a spiritual concept

(associated with “cult value”), but Benjamin gives it a material basis—the aura of the work is simply “its presence in space and time, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” as can be revealed “by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction” (220). Without an aura, art takes on an explicitly propagandistic function: “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (224).

Thornton argued that Benjamin’s thesis of the decline of the aura in the age of mechanical reproduction was wrong: “What Benjamin did not and could not foresee was the formation of new authenticities specific to recorded entertainment, for these were dependent on historical changes in the circumstances of both the production and consumption of music” (27). One can take issue with Thornton’s analysis of Benjamin,⁴ but the notion of “authentication” is a critical move in understanding the role of truth in commercialized art. In Thornton’s hands, the term becomes a verb: her argument is that works of art are not “authentic” or “inauthentic” in their very essence; rather, they are “authenticated” within specific communities of artists and auditors.

Allan Moore used Thornton’s understanding to build a preliminary theoretical framework from which to discuss authenticity in popular music more meaningfully. Usefully, Moore shifts the focus of analysis from the music to the personalities involved. “Rather than ask *what* (piece of music, or activity) is being authenticated,” he writes, “I ask *who*” (210, emphasis in original). From here, Moore develops a three-tiered conception of authenticity as understood through expression (“first person authenticity,” 211), execution (“third person authenticity,” 214), and experience (“second person authenticity,” 220). Here Moore develops a rhetorical conception of the process of authentication as a matter of establishing ethos through performances that specific audiences find convincing. As with the rhetorical test of persuasion, the ultimate test of authenticity is not truth but the ability to gain adherents.

More recently, Adam Behr developed Moore’s conception further, exploring “first person plural” (9) authenticity in the collective form of the band. Behr notes that the figure of the band—artificial and commercial as it may inherently be—is subject to an authentication process that encompasses the interactions among band members as well as those among the band, its fans, and the celebrity apparatus. He posits viewing authenticity in rock music not just ideologically but also in specific practices, such that authenticity would describe not just a myth but a set of practices associated with that myth.

Lou Reed articulated his view of that set of practices on the sleeve notes to *New York* (1989): “You can’t beat 2 guitars, bass and drums.” Behr quotes Reed with skepticism, contextualizing, in terms of Frith’s observation, that by the late 1980s that set of practices had become tedious and identified not with rock’s rebellion but with its articulation of “the reconciliation of rebelliousness and capital” (2).

Leaving aside the specific technological basis for Reed's comment (which was likely aimed at the growing popularity of synthesizer-based pop and electronic dance music),⁵ the implicit argument here is that true rock music is simple and straightforward, with as little artifice as possible. Artifice, it is implied, opens the door for corrupting influences.

In an interview broadcast in 1986, Reed broke down the mystique of the Velvet as follows:

They're all real simple ideas. Three chords, turn it up, and make the lyrics be about something. It had to be about something that had to do with everyday reality as we knew it then, as opposed to just, um, nothing, or making believe it was about something. I mean, I think a real characteristic of the Velvet Underground, as I think is about my own songs, is that they're really about something, I mean, that we really care about that really happened, and they have some bearing in real life and they're not just a disposable subject; I mean, I was trying to give you a shot of some of the street. (Evans 6:42–7:25)

Again, Reed highlights the simplicity and straightforwardness of the Velvet's music alongside the basic honesty of his storytelling. The implicit theory of authenticity is again rhetorical, as it is rooted in a classical notion of ethos as the speaker's credibility, which is seen as inversely proportionate to the complexity or obscurity of his representations. Reed's conception of authenticity follows the Platonic model of discourse which saw corruption lurking in rhetorical excess. Interestingly, the condemnation of such excess often took an explicitly sexual character. The Roman historian Tacitus, for example, wrote in a typical passage, "it is undoubtedly better to clothe what you have to say even in a rough homespun than to parade it in the gay-colored garb of a courtesan. There is a fashion much in vogue with quite a number of counsel nowadays that ill befits an orator, and is indeed even scarce worthy of a man" (299–301).⁶

Artifice and Commerce

I return now to the two main assumptions that underscore the Velvet's claim to authenticity: that they gave their audiences unmediated access to the truth of their experiences and that they resisted commercialism. These claims, though widely accepted by commentators on the band, are factually weak at best. While much ink has been spilled explaining the original and authentic genius that is the Velvet Underground, an equally compelling case could be made that the band's first album marked a turn towards insincerity and inauthenticity in popular music. The Velvet's work chronicled lives they neither led nor aspired to; Lou Reed was neither the drug addict nor the street-tough hustler his lyrics portrayed. Despite frequent references to improvisation, the Velvet's sound and image was deliberately constructed. Chris Colin writes that, like Reed himself, the Velvet's songs "offer the illusion of not caring; in reality, he and his music are carefully crafted" (C17). And Dave Toropov commented on the album's somewhat contradictory exploration of

dark themes in the context of the silliness of the peelable banana cover and Reed's vocal delivery: "It's a record that lives in the NYC sewers and the loft art shows simultaneously....*The Velvet Underground & Nico* could be read as a marketing ploy if you were a cynical man" (Ryan and Toropov).

In some ways the mystique of authenticity surrounding the Velvets is almost perverse—Reed and Cale met while recording a kitsch single for a band called the Primitives. Rock critic Alexis Petridis writes that this song, "The Ostrich," "was meant to be a quick knock-off of a novelty dance fad single"; Reed "couldn't even be bothered to write his own riff, pinching it from the Crystals' 1963 smash 'Then He Kissed Me'" (Petridis). The 'Ostrich-tuning' guitar technique that would make this song his own was itself copied from another guitarist.

And of course the Velvet Underground formed under the alleged production of the crown prince of artifice himself, New York art-world cult hero Andy Warhol. Warhol—"who has managed to accomplish more in this culture while acting (in public at least) like a total autistic null-node than almost any other figure of the sixties" (Bangs 170)—celebrated the merger of art and commerce in much of his work and was fascinated by (and not necessarily resistant to) the logic of consumerism.

Indeed, Warhol's influence on the band was itself exaggerated. Norman Dolph, the DJ of Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable who ended up doing most of the actual producing on *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, acknowledged that the extent of Warhol's influence was to demand that Nico be added to the lineup (Buskin n.p.). As "producer," Reed once told *Musician Magazine*, Warhol "just sat there and said, 'Oooh, that's fantastic,' and the engineer would say, 'Oh yeah! Right! It is fantastic, isn't it?'" (qtd in Buskin). Dolph suggested that the Warhol connection was cynically exaggerated because it "offered so much built-in PR, [Columbia Records] would snap it up in five seconds" (qtd in Buskin).

In some ways it is perverse that the Velvets' (and particularly Lou Reed's) reputation for authenticity has only increased in the decades following their break-up. While Reed himself had a prolific and fascinating career as a musician and celebrity, he can hardly be accused of disavowing the link between art and commerce. The 1980s saw him selling scooters for Honda while "Walk on the Wild Side" played; the 1990s saw "Venus in Furs" used somewhat absurdly as the soundtrack for a Dunlop tire commercial; and the 2000s saw him designing a smart-phone app (Dombal). Indeed, that very Honda advertisement—hailed by the *New York Times* as "one of the most acclaimed ads ever filmed in [New York]"—was created by a copywriter who had never set foot in the city (Feinberg n.p.). Later years even saw the Velvet Underground suing the Andy Warhol Foundation for the use of the banana image from the Velvets' album (Turner n.p.). They claimed the banana was a "significant element of Velvet Underground's ongoing licensed merchandising activity" (Hogan n.p.). A judge rejected their copyright claim and they settled the trademark claim (Michaels).

And let us not forget that one of Reed's last public appearances was a bizarre talk at Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, a conference of the advertising industry, in which he had nothing but praise for an audience of admen, whom he characterized as the last best hope for musicians to make a living: "In the world of downloading, the only people who will pay you for what you do are you guys....Nowadays, people say, 'Oh, that was a great ad.' Before, it used to be, 'You fucking sellout.' But what's fair is fair. And the ad people play fair with you" (qtd in Nudd n.p.).

So there you have it—the Velvets were a mirage, their sound and image a deliberately constructed artifice whose claim to offer listeners an unadulterated reality was a ruse. Yet, at the same time, I agree with the dominant characterization of the Velvets as an authentic voice. They not only broke important musical and cultural ground in the 1960s; they absolutely rocked. I agree with the critics who continue to say that "[a]fter 45 years, the album is still unsettling" (Harrison B2).

(Re)Reading *The Velvet Underground & Nico*

I believe that the "reality" to which Reed and the Velvets were being true had less to do with a lack of artifice and much more to do with the moral sensibility that infused the sounds and stories of their songs. While Lou Reed shared with Andy Warhol a fascination with decadence, he was, as Ellen Willis put it in what remains over 30 years later one of the finest analyses of the Velvets' work, "unmoved by that aspect of the pop mentality, and of rock-and-roll, that got off on the American Dream. In a sense, the self-conscious formalism of his music—the quality that made the Velvets uncommercial—was an attempt to purify rock-and-roll, to purge it of all those associations with material goodies and erotic good times" (115).

Sonically, the Velvets' first album navigates the tension between musical order and noisy disorder by exposing order as a simulacrum.⁷ They employed a minimalist rock-and-roll structure and continuously disrupted that structure with seemingly out-of-control noise.

"Heroin" demonstrates the point. "Heroin" is structured around a single guitar note that speeds up and slows down throughout the course of the song. The notion of "rush" and "nod" that accompanies the heroin experience is captured beautifully in this rhythm. In the beginning the beat is extremely slow, and it builds up to a pounding frenzy and then drops off suddenly at the end of each verse. The hollow, repetitive throbbing of Maureen Tucker's drumming gives the song a haunting presence that dramatizes the catharsis for the listener. The order contained by the song is the order of the heroin experience: rush, nod, fix, rush, nod, fix, rush, nod fix, rush, nod, fix, and, ineluctably, die. The song combines the transcendence of religion with death's inevitability. Lyrically, the song at first seems like a religious celebration of the junkie's experience; the singer is going to "try for the Kingdom" because the drugs in his veins make him "feel just like Jesus' son." Heroin, the lyrics seem to argue, is a path to spiritual enlightenment and mystical experience.

The second verse moves from this triumphant enlightenment to a denial of the surrounding world; the junkie is now going to try to nullify his life. Lou Reed's narrator longs for the glorified anarchic life of the ancient sailor as an escape from the "big city." He is willful and conscious of his rejection of the living world. It is the consciousness of his choice of death that turns the song into an embrace of both sin and redemption. As Willis wrote,

"It is the clarity of his consciousness that gives the sin its enormity. Yet the clarity also offers a glimmer of redemption. In the very act of choosing numbness the singer admits the depths of his pain and bitterness, his longing for something better; he is aware of every nuance of his rejection of awareness; he sings a magnificently heartfelt song about how he just doesn't care" (122).

And yet. The third major claim of the lyrics is not about sin or transcendence but about the triumph of ignorance, repeated boldly and unselfconsciously at the end of each stanza: "And I guess that I just don't know." The singer's fate is still uncertain. Both the religious/spiritual argument and the death/damnation argument seem to be certainties—the speaker has no doubt of either his religious transcendence or his nihilistic acceptance of death. But these last lines indicate that uncertainty is ineluctable in such matters; we never truly know our own lives. It is Lou Reed's final argument of apathy that resolves the contradictions of the song—while "I guess that I just don't know," at least I can "thank God that I just don't care!" Heroin is certainly a path to a feeling of religious transcendence. Just as certainly it is a rejection of the living world in favor of the numbness and lack of feeling death brings. All the same, knowledge is unattainable ("I guess"). With the numbness comes apathy, and apathy is transcendental.

A sense of continuum, from transcendence to death to ignorance to apathy, is punctuated by the navigation of feedback. A low, steady feedback hum begins in the middle of the third verse and builds up throughout the rest of the song. The harmony of the vocals and rhythm barely hold together once the feedback begins wailing loudly in the fourth verse, and by the end Reed's voice is practically shouting into a vortex of noise. The feedback that assaults the listener just before the end punctuates the depth of the singer's desperation and the magnitude of his decision. The vortex spins rapidly, slowing down at the last nod into a low dissonant howl that continues until the last guitar string is brushed and the song ends. The violence and potential chaos signified by the wall of feedback constructed in the last verses expose the illusion of order and harmony as a farce—a simulacrum of stability in a world of chaos. The chaos breaks off when the junkie dies; the certainty of death is the only element of order possible in a fundamentally chaotic world. The only real transcendence, we learn, is apathy: "And thank God that I just don't care."

Another song whose primary lyrical focus is a heroin addict is "I'm Waiting for the Man." Lyrically, the song is the first-person narrative of an addict scoring drugs in Harlem.⁸ Reed's addict exhibits the combination of street wisdom and schoolboy innocence that is a trademark of many of his characters. He nervously grips his

cash while interacting with the (black) locals, yet he sagely explains to the listener the first rule of buying drugs: “you always got to wait.”

As indicated in the title, the song is about waiting rather than doing. The waiting opens the narrator up to moments of insight and allegory—Matthew Bannister, for example, writes of Reed’s “fantasy of blackness” manifest in a “real-life interaction” which “suggests an ironic historical account of perceived white male inadequacy in popular music—always dependent on the black injection for a life-giving fix” (173–74). And the song climaxes with the drug experience itself (a “sweet taste” from the dealer leaves the user “feeling good; I’m gonna work it on out”). But the conclusion is punctuated with the pointlessness of it all; these good feelings will take us only through tomorrow, “but that’s just another time.” It is the interminable wait, rather than the high itself, that animates the life of Reed’s addict. The chaos of the junkie’s life is ordered this time not by death but rather by the endless drama of certain deferral.

This sense of repeated deferral is articulated musically as well as lyrically. Like “Heroin,” the song is structured around a steady guitar riff that builds to a noisy (or at least, noisier) conclusion after several repetitions, but it is much more energetic and up tempo from start to finish while the noisiness of the crescendo is far more subtle. The song rocks hard—as Dave Toporov put it, “It was just great garage rock.” (Ryan and Toporov n.p.). Part of its beauty is its utter simplicity, a bluesy two-chord guitar riff backed up by pounding drums, bass, and piano.⁹ Guitar and bass are repetitive and relentless while piano and drums grow only slightly more insistent by the final throes of the song. The Velvets never deliver the sort of climactic release one might expect from the build-up. Instead the song fades out uneventfully as the musicians continue hammering away. Michael Campbell and James Brody call the instrumental parts of the song “virtually faceless; they have little inherent musical interest” (257). But that is precisely why the minimalism works; they posit that the “jangly conjunction of sound and rhythm driven by Cale’s two-fisted piano playing, surrounds Reed’s voice with the nervous energy of the dope-deprived addict” (257). The simplicity of the music symmetrically frames Reed’s monotonous vocal delivery. While the classically trained Cale may have been pummeling out piano chords in what Richard Witts called “an amphetamine-frenzied version of [composer LaMonte Young’s] *X for Henry Flynt*,” the increasing insistence of these chords complements the story without dominating the beat or the storyline (Witts 81),¹⁰ making for what Richard Mortifoguo hailed as “one of the finest moments in rock and roll” (60). As Campbell and Brody conclude, “Its very simplicity and almost perverse insistence seems to convey in music the obsessive need of the man waiting for the man” (257).

“Venus in Furs” gets its name from the novel by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, and the lyrics of the song echo the narrative of that novel—a dark, haunting tale of sexual slavery, domination, and submission. The mood of the song is black but sensuous, structured around a slow throbbing tribal rhythm of continuous tempo. The guitar jams about this rhythm with a choppy, undulating directness, and Cale’s

viola climbs and falls throughout the piece with a raw, intuitive precision, giving the song a surrealistic feel. The sound is not erotic *per se*, but it is sensual, situating its emotion in the body, with pain as the center of feeling. Guitarist Sterling Morrison said the song was “just a different kind of love song. [Gerald] Malanga knelt on stage and kissed Mary Woronov’s black leather boots during this song. Everybody was saying this is the vision of all-time evil and I always said, ‘Well, we’re not going to lie. It’s pretty. “Venus in Furs” is a beautiful song. It was the closest that we ever came in my mind to being exactly what I thought we could be” (qtd in Bockris and Malanga 74).

With “Venus in Furs,” the Velvet “dared to intimate that sado-masochism might have more to do with their—and our—reality than universal love” (Bockris and Malanga 75). Both lyrically and musically the song inscribes its power in that realm of sensuality where Eros meets Thanatos. The violence of noise in “Venus in Furs” is deliberately applied, overlaid with a dramatic ritual of sensual dominance and submission. The sound is mechanical and repetitive, assaulting the listener without letting up. Pain is consciously applied to voluntary subjects with a precision that disrupts conventional explanations of love and sex. While the story is of a sexual “underground”¹¹ there is a sense of universality to the emotion as played out in the music, a darker side to sensuality. The mood is not lusty *per se*; it seduces the listener with the painful prolongation of desire rather than the crashing release of sexual tension implied in a “cock rock” guitar solo. “Venus in Furs” is a caricature of real experience that highlights seduction as power rooted in the body. It is both beautiful and seductive; its lyrics allude both to love and to raw experience. The song is particularly effective in the way it orders chaos—the violence is there, but it is selectively applied in a concrete form rather than anarchic. The song’s beauty stems from this unity of form and content.

Such beauty is evident even in the uglier songs on this recording. Velvet guitarist Sterling Morrison assures us that “European Son,” that seven-minute 45-second wall of dueling guitar drone and wailing feedback that concludes the record, “is very tame now” (qtd in Bockris and Malanga 75), but listening to it in 2015 it sounds as harsh as I remember thinking it back in the 1980s. Morrison was perhaps correct that decades of punk and noise scenes (spurred in part by this very album) have made it difficult to hear these sound combinations as particularly revolutionary today. Nevertheless, the song remains unique. Seven minutes of dissonance follow less than one minute of Reed’s sour Dylanesque vocals and spiteful lyrics (dedicated to poet Delmore Schwartz).¹² The song has been called the album’s “least accessible track” (Unterberger 90) with good reason. Its rambling noisiness is menacing and the feedback is daunting. But its structure and melody (and the song remains melodic) invite the listener in with urgency and mystery. It is fitting that the source of the signature sound that begins this long journey into chaos that closes the album—a steady roar followed by what sounds like glass shattering perfectly on beat right around the one-minute mark—remains uncertain to this day, having been variously described by band members and witnesses as a

chair thrown into a stack of steel plates, a glass bottle dropping, and a mirror breaking (Unterberger 90).

This tension between dissonance and melody is equally inviting in other songs on the album, for example “Run, Run, Run,” which “chugs along in crackling Bo Diddley style until the chorus, where Maureen’s voice lights up the atonal field like illumination rounds” (Mortifoguo 60). These vocal contrasts are mirrored by musical contrasts between a straightforward blues rhythm and seemingly uncontrolled guitar improvisation. And the song’s lyrical content—quick vignettes of four junkies scoring dope on New York’s streets—similarly invites the listener into the lives (and “Gypsy deaths”) of these colorful characters (“Teenage Mary,” “Margarita Passion,” “Seasick Sarah,” and “Beardless Harry”). And of course the album begins with “Sunday Morning,” a seemingly uplifting lullaby allegedly written on an actual Sunday morning after an all-night party (Harvard 94). “Sunday Morning” creates a similar tension, but its dissonance comes not from wailing feedback but from an uneasy relation between its saccharine musical sound and its paranoid lyrical content. The song was written last—it was not included in the band’s original take of the album—and it was written only because manager Paul Morrissey demanded at least one song that could get radio play. Warhol suggested the lyrical content (“Whyn’t you write a song about paranoia?”: Reed, qtd in Unterberger 116) in one of the “producer’s” few musical contributions to the album.

This analysis would be incomplete without mention of Nico, the New York fashion model whom Warhol put in the Velvet Underground, as Reed joked decades later, “because none of us were good looking enough” (Gibbons). Nico was supposed to sing “Sunday Morning,” but Reed insisted at the last minute on singing it himself. As Richie Unterberger notes, this is perhaps for the best, for Reed’s “effectively breathy singing” masks the “ambiguous unease and uncertainty” (116) described in the lyrics. But Nico’s contributions are nevertheless fundamental to the overall character of the album. Nico combined a surprisingly elegant monotone with cool deliberation in a voice that suggested both intimacy and detachment. The ubiquitously covered “Femme Fatale” is sardonic and satirical. The song was purportedly written, at Warhol’s request, about actress Edie Sedgwick, whom Reed once described as “somebody who was one and has since been committed to an institution for being one. And will one day open up a school to train others” (Reed, *1969 Velvet Underground Live* n.p.). The style of the song is straight out of 1950s pap sentiment; the sound is almost uplifting. This sound is punctuated by the irony of Nico’s cold, harsh lyrics, delivered in a sardonic monotone—the order of uplifting pop shattered by the discordance of reality. The illusion of sappiness is exposed by the cold, detached vocal delivery of depressing lyrics. The song makes its point, Willis writes, “by juxtaposing sweet, simple, catchy melodies with bitter lyrics sung in a flat, almost affectless voice” (121). The song was significantly influential in subsequent rock-and-roll history, inspiring cover versions from diverse acts such as Big Star (1978), Propaganda (1984), R.E.M. (1986), and Aloe Black (2010).

Equally influential was “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” described by Richard Witts as Andy Warhol’s “favorite song” (45). The tune has been covered by Japan (1983), Nick Cave (1986), Siouxsie & the Banshees (2004), and Simple Minds (2001), among others. Its title has been appropriated as a novel title (William Gibson), a band name (Eisenstein), a film title (*All Tomorrow’s Parties*), and the name of an international music festival (Ben Sisario). “All Tomorrow’s Parties” combines a steady, simple bass line and drum with a tambourine and some high-tempo classical piano and guitar noodling. When Nico’s eerie delivery is added, the sense of impending doom is overwhelming. The song is long and repetitive, and the improvisation seems to hover on the very threshold of insanity.

It may be that the Velvet’s first album was dominated by themes of death, decadence, and despair, but listening to it again nearly half a century later, it is still the message of transcendence that shines through. While the Velvet’s message was transmitted through a commodity, it did not lose its power (nor did it become pure propaganda) in the commodity form. At the end of it all, what the Velvet’s crave is transcendence, and they achieve it metaphorically through their impact on rock-and-roll history—“the Velvet’s use of a mass art form was a metaphor for transcendence, for connection, for resistance to solipsism and despair” (Willis 117).

Conclusion: I’ll Be Your Mirror

“I’ll Be Your Mirror” is a beautiful ballad, bringing home the message of transcendence in the aura of its simplicity. After punk the song seems out of place. The beauty of punk’s nihilism was, in part, its ability to make “less discordant sensibilities seem corny, even to those of us who might prefer to feel otherwise” (Willis 116). But the Velvet’s were not only, or even primarily, nihilists—their nihilism and despair were coupled with a moralism that sought transcendence. Listening to the album today the song makes perfect sense situated between the misogyny of “There She Goes Again” and the sheer hypnotic evil of “Black Angel’s Death Song.” The melancholy warmth of the slow guitar progression backs up Nico’s smooth, calm delivery. Her voice may be monotonous, but she is a close friend, holding my hand as she sings reassuringly into my ear. The Velvet’s have led me through the depths of decadence and despair; Nico offers guidance out of the pits of hell. Her guidance is our view of ourselves, a mirror reflecting the innocence we know we still possess, no matter how chaotic the world might be. The chaos of their songs reflects the individual lost in self-destruction; the violence of the wailing guitar feedback is the individual coming to grips with the paradox of retaining moral agency in the face of the sheer terror of everyday existence. “I’ll be your mirror,” sings Nico. “But you need to look into it once in a while,” say the Velvet’s. And, says Ellen Willis, “Life may be a brutal struggle, sin inevitable, innocence elusive and transient, grace a gift, not a reward.... [N]evertheless, we are responsible for who and what we become” (120). This is the central message of *The Velvet Underground & Nico*.

This message is not destroyed by the commodity system. It is in fact the commodity system that gives this message the opportunity to connect. That the Velvets' product was an artifice, a simulacrum of experience that they never had, is beside the point. The band's ability to construct meaning through this artifice is the point, as it is for all rock and roll. The Velvets' artistic self-consciousness allowed them the emotional distance to fairly represent images of a central paradox of human existence—the search for order in a chaotic world. And the answer to this paradox lies in the individual's ability to see him/herself in the mirror, to recognize that innocence need not be sacrificed to experience. Their emotional distance is in itself an escape from the need to resolve this paradox, yet it is transcendent because it reveals that the desire to escape this paradox is a profoundly and essentially human desire.

It is certainly more than fair to say, as Lester Bangs did, that Lou Reed is “a completely depraved pervert and a death dwarf...a liar, a wasted talent, an artist continually in flux, and a huckster selling pounds of his own flesh” (270). But the Velvet Underground are at the same time honest. Their distance from their material “makes clear that the feelings being protected are so unbearably intense that if not controlled and contained they would overwhelm both the Velvets and their audience. The Velvets' real song is how hard it is to admit, even to themselves” (Willis 121).

It is only possible for their portrayal of raw experience to appear honest and believable through the commodified simulacrum offered by rock and roll. Through the commodity, the Velvets situate themselves both within and beside themselves, like the street prophet in Lou Reed's later “Street Hassle,” to which Willis refers in the quotation above, wryly commenting on the immensity of the choice facing others, and snickering at the irony that it is only because he need not choose himself that his vision is so clear. If he had to make the choice himself, he would be overwhelmed. Like Reed's prophet, the self-conscious aesthete speaking through the commodity form need not make the choice either. This distance between signifier and signified ironically attests to the magnitude of the signified, and hence to the reality of the experience. The pain is so real because it is insincere. We know that were it sincere it would be too much to bear. Yet it is always already too much to bear—we do not evade responsibility for our actions as human beings in the world of experience. The only hope for transcendence is to take a long look in the mirror and discover that voice that reflects who and what we are.

The beauty of the Velvets is their ability to negotiate this tension through their use of order and chaos mediated through the commodity form. Without this mediation, the Velvets could not possibly maintain the critical distance necessary to make the comment. Underlying this critical distance is the assumption that as human beings we will inevitably hide from the paradoxes of life in the world. The Velvets offer the listener his or her reflection in the mirror, the ever-present empowerment of self-confidence and identity. It is up to the listener to choose; after all, the Velvets have no real stake in the matter.

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Notes

- [1] Although there certainly are a few; see, for example, Rundle, who calls *The Velvet Underground & Nico* “jejune amateurishness, straying into self-parody”.
- [2] Bawdy tales were part of popular and not-so-popular music going back at least to early country and blues; there were plenty of jazz songs that dealt with such themes.
- [3] “Ostrich-tuning” refers to a technique Reed developed in the novelty song “The Ostrich” recorded by the Primitives in 1964. Reed tuned all his guitar strings to the same note, giving the guitar sounds on “All Tomorrow’s Parties” and “Venus in Furs” an “intense, clangorous din” (Petridis) that worked perfectly with Cale’s droning violas; apparently the technique impressed Cale enough to consider Reed a “natural musical genius” (Harvard 109). Influence aside, it is important to note that these claims to originality can be disputed; of the Ostrich tuning technique Reed has frankly admitted that he copied it from another guitarist (“I think his name was Jerry Vance,” qtd in di Perna), and the minimalist droning that Cale brought to the sound had been pioneered by numerous avant-garde musicians including La Monte Young, with whom Cale had worked previously (see Ross 509; Fink 173).
- [4] In particular, while it is true that Benjamin did not foresee the specific forms of authentication that would arise in the 20th century, he did note that, in film, authentication marked a shift in the “cult value” of the work of art to the “cult of personality”: “The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (231). For Benjamin, the modern forms of authentication discussed by Thornton would likely be read as different forms of appearance of this phony aura; Thornton, on the other hand, would likely argue that the “aura” in pre-reproduction art is itself also an “authentication.” While I agree with Thornton ultimately on this point, I think she discounts Benjamin’s position too easily and ignores the critique of the commodity form itself implicit in his work.
- [5] The relation of specific technologies to debates over authenticity in rock music is beyond the scope of this article, but Frith’s comments (Shepherd 306) on the topic are perhaps more relevant than ever given the current overwhelming popularity of electronic dance music.
- [6] There is something to be said about the frequency of the appearance of this image of the gender-bending sex worker in Roman condemnations of rhetorical excess; such figures also, of course, pepper many of Reed’s lyrics, both in the Velvets and beyond. Both Quintilian and Cicero similarly analogized rhetoric to feminine clothing and specifically compared unnecessary rhetorical adornment to men wearing make-up.
- [7] My reading of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* is here influenced by Jacques Attali’s discussion of noise as power and of music as the ordering of chaos.
- [8] Interestingly, the narrative morphs into second person in the fourth verse, inviting the listener to directly inhabit the world of Reed’s character, before returning to first person.
- [9] The song’s simplicity perhaps masks an underlying complexity; Witts points out that the “stock bass patterns” of the song “contradict their harmonic functions” (87). While this contradiction gives the arrangement its unique timbre (which Campbell and Brody find “jangly,” 257), the relentless repetition of the rhythm gives it a blues-rock simplicity that borders on party rock.
- [10] Few rock fans would likely know the reference in the first place, but at this tempo and in the context of the guitar riff, Young’s composition is barely recognizable anyway.
- [11] The band’s name itself, as is well known, was taken from the title of another book about this underground (Leigh).

- [12] “Delmore despised rock ‘n’ roll lyrics,” Morrison told Ignacio Julia; “he thought they were ridiculous and awful...so we wrote a song that Delmore would like: twenty seconds of lyrics and seven minutes of noise” (qtd in Unterberger 90).

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