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## ‘Taylor Swift: the hardest working, zaniest girl in show business...’

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The shift from rock and country music to pop stardom is rife with obstacles. Rock and country stars are perceived to be more ‘authentic’ than their pop music counterparts, because their image is imbued with a sense of labour (see Frith 1981; Grossberg 1992, Moore 2002, Peterson 1997, Palmer 1997). Rock and country stars are therefore often perceived as ‘the real thing’: because they work hard at writing, performing and recording their *own* material, play specific instrumentation, struggle to get their music produced and performed (often sweating and straining physically on stage), and because their lyrics are filled with personal tales of working life and hardship. Within American country music, stardom is also reliant on a strong sense of truth telling; performances are seemingly rooted in autobiography and intimate confession, from Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard, to Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn. The opposite informs the discourse around pop music: where intimacy, sincerity, labour and realism imbues country, artificial entertainment, commercial manufacture, and synthetic construction mark the realm of pop (Grossberg 1992).

When Taylor Swift publicly announced she was leaving country music for pop stardom, in anticipation of her 2014 release *1989*, she had to navigate this tricky terrain carefully. Swift’s transformation was remarkably successful; she became one of the biggest female pop stars in the world, and managed to hold on to much of her original fan base, as well as expand her appeal. How did her star text render this transition possible? It is my contention that Swift shifted the discourse of ‘authenticity’ that informed her country persona *away* from its focus on confessional truth-telling and (Southern) hard work, towards one of the authentically ‘zany’; a figure who emphasises the pop ‘performance’ as one of hard work instead, because she exposed its construction as one that does not come ‘naturally’. Less quirky cute and more physically comic than the closely related ‘adorkable’ (McIntyre 2015), the zany persona presented Swift as a comical, clumsy goofball working hard at trying to adapt herself to the world of commercial entertainment. In the following few paragraphs, I first briefly elaborate on category of the zany, and then demonstrate how and where it infused Swift’s star text during her transition to pop music. By presenting herself as the ‘zany’, Swift was able to position herself, in this stage of her career, both as a constructed, hapless pop princess *and* an autonomous and savvy industry professional, all the while maintaining an ‘authentic’ sense of hard work.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Sianne Ngai examines the three aesthetic categories that dominate contemporary culture: the cute, the zany and the interesting. Ngai positions these three categories in relation to capitalism and the Post-Fordist mode of production. In contrast to the cute (where the commodity is one of romance and *consumption*), and the interesting (informed by discursive exchange and realism in *circulation*), Ngai argues that the zany marks a sense of *production*. The zany is a category fuelled by work, by the performative, by comedy (Ngai offers Lucille Ball's persona in *I Love Lucy* as a key example). It is a decidedly neo-liberal character, Ngai argues, capable of adjusting to new roles and situations quickly; a figure that is 'doggedly persistent' in 'comically strenuous efforts' (Ngai 2012, p. 175), highly physical and intensely affective. The zany is characterised by an ability to quickly pick up new skills, by constant transition, performance and impersonation, and above all, by an incessant 'doing'. The zany is thus emblematic of our current times of precarious labour, because the zany (1) embodies the spheres of production and reproduction alike; (2) offers a constant dialectic between social inflexibility and flexibility; and 3) erodes the distinction between work and play. In offering all this, I suggest, the zany is able to introduce a meticulously crafted pop performance and *safeguard* it within the context of authenticity because the zany 'works hard' at the performance and is revealed 'truthfully' to still be a playful goofball underneath. This is precisely what we see at work in Swift's transition from country to pop stardom, and what rendered her transition relatively seamless.

Swift's early celebrity adhered closely to the terms of country music's authenticity/labour framework. She wrote and performed her own songs, accompanied herself on the guitar, and recounted real-life experiences in her diary-entry style lyrics. Swift quickly garnered a large fan base by offering fans intimate access to her 'real' self, working her 'celebrity-as-commodity' star text through all possible points of connection (Elcessor, 2012; Turner 2013). She posted regular behind-the-scenes videos, talked directly to camera about personal experiences, introduced her 'real' friends, relationships and family, discussed her writing process, was open about her heartaches, and regularly surprised her fans publicly, in reverse fan pilgrimages of sorts. Her star image was based on the combined pillars of hard work, 'real' talent and her 'authentically' being herself. Swift's transition to artificial, manufactured pop music at a career high thus required intricate manoeuvring. 'The reinvention of Taylor Swift', as *Rolling Stone* called it (2014), began by tentatively straddling genre borders during the pre-release publicity for *1989*. Swift publicly announced she would move from Nashville to New York, and stated that henceforth she would be offering her fans 'blatant pop music' (ibid. *Rolling Stone*, the 'blatant' underscoring both her commitment to the genre *and* her honesty about it). The pop venture was cautiously marked as distinctly collaborative. Swift worked with renowned commercial pop producers Max Martin, Shellback and Jack Antonoff, while but all insisted she would retain her highly personal and confessional writing style. (Grammy promotions for the album later revealed that during her collaboration with these recording professionals, she remained 'true' to herself; the footage shows her singing song ideas goofily, spontaneously, into her collaborators' voicemails, and evidences the sense of zany fun, hilarity and play that informed their working together.)

As Swift's star text transitioned more solidly into pop-star territory, her persona became increasingly zany. The different music videos for *1989* all highlight Swift's skills for adaptation and transformation by showing her in a wide range of elaborate and extravagant, zany performances. In *Shake it Off*, the first video for the album, this is most

evident. In the video, we witness Swift try on a range of 'pop' performance-modes with different dance troupes (hip hop, ballet, cheerleading): she flaps her limbs wildly as she attempts to join them, constantly re-adjusting her performances in blushed embarrassment, while managing to get the laugh and the audience on her side. After 'shaking off' her failings in each register, the video concludes with Swift's implied realisation that she will never quite 'fit in' to any commercially viable image, and prefers to embrace her natural zany state instead. By exposing the artificial manufacture of pop performances, and showing how hard she needs to work at them, Swift utilises the figure of the zany to remind the audience of her 'true' natural state underneath her pop abilities, while preserving her image of hard work, through her (comic) incessant doings.

Swift's zaniness made another important public appearance in 2015, after Swift withdrew *1989* from online streaming, and wrote a tightly constructed public letter to Apple Music arguing artists should be paid during the first three months of their service. When Apple promptly responded by adjusting its terms, and Swift proceeded to star in a range of Apple Music advertisements, it became evident that her business acumen had placed her in a unique position of power. With her pop music industry clout now evident, Swift quickly countered this by placing the authentic, zany Taylor at the heart of the Apple Music advertisements; we see her singing and dancing wildly while running on a treadmill, until she falls off it, clumsily but with great gusto, slapstick-style.

Swift's 'zany' public persona provided her pop star celebrity with a continued sense of authenticity. It highlighted the work that goes into manufactured performance but exposes a 'natural' state clumsiness to conceal commercial and professional autonomy. The slippery slopes of the terrain nevertheless persist. After the release of *1989*, Swift's 'authenticity' began to tear at the seams. Critics lamented her freshly dyed platinum blonde hair, and her uncomfortable public 'performances' off-screen and stage (particularly her publicity stint romance with Tom Hiddleston and her dispute with Kanye West). Swift announced a prolonged hiatus, because 'people might need a break from [her]' (Stutz 2015). In this light, it is intriguing that the singer announced in the lyrics of her 2017 come-back single, 'Look what you made me do', that 'the old Taylor' is now 'dead'. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not 'zany Taylor' someday will rise again.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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