

## **‘Hypocritical bullshit performed through gritted teeth’: Authenticity discourses in Nickelback’s album reviews in Finnish media**

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### Abstract

*The Canadian band Nickelback has faced substantial negative feedback in the media. This article examines discourses constructed in the critiques of the band, focusing on the theme of authenticity, by analysing reviews of the band from Finnish media in the time frame of 2000–2014. Traditional discourses of authenticity are widely present in the critical reception, valuing uncommercialism, subversiveness, correspondence of art and persona, originality and truth in particular.*

### Keywords:

Nickelback  
authenticity  
music criticism  
music journalism  
discourse  
Finland

### Introduction

*Bad music isn’t about music at all; it’s about status for the audience, money for the mediator, and status and money for the critic.*

Deena Weinstein, 2004a

The Canadian band Nickelback is often accused of lacking rock credibility. There are Nickelback jokes, Internet memes, even a web browser plugin concealing all information involving Nickelback. Nearly 40,000 people signed a petition in 2011 to ban Nickelback from performing at the halftime show of a high-profile football game in Detroit (Rock News Desk 2011). More pressure on

Nickelback came when the American duo The Black Keys attacked the band in *Rolling Stone*, one of the dominant magazines in rock culture, accusing them of ruining rock 'n' roll with their 'watered-down, post-grunge crap, horrendous shit' (Hiatt 2012). Despite the substantial backlash against Nickelback in the media and their status as a significant player in the popular music field today, little research has been done on the subject. Just as some varieties of music have been seen as less 'worthy of scholarly study' in popular music studies (McLeod 2001: 58), crossover or mainstream styles have not attracted interest in the field of metal music studies (Brown 2011: 235). In consequence, this study intends to contribute to filling some of the gaps in the field, focusing in particular on the fringes of metal music studies as a result of Nickelback's mainstream, metal-influenced sound.

My topic also hopes to shed light on the critical reception of Nickelback in the Finnish media, particularly with regard to questions of authenticity, and to examine the different discourses constructed by reviews concerned with Nickelback's value and their apparent authenticity as a rock band. I also pay attention to how the patterns repeated in the reviews of Nickelback construct a discourse of authenticity, and what the journals pursue by using these patterns. Firstly, the article introduces the methods and research material, followed by exploring the concept of authenticity and previous research on the subject. Secondly, it moves on to the case of Nickelback, contextualizing the band and its background, and proceeding with the reviews and the central discourses constructed in them. Lastly, I conclude the main findings of the article.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

The research material focuses on music criticism, since 'The music press is the place where pop value judgments are most clearly articulated' (Frith 1987: 136). Music media and critics construct what authenticity is – and what is left outside of it. Music journalism reinforces concepts such as authenticity that are used to justify artistic values, thus playing an essential role in canon formation and maintenance (see Jones 2008: 18). This is why I approach the concept of authenticity through rock journalism.

The reviews that form my research material are from the Finnish music magazines *Soundi/Sound* and *Rumba*; *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading newspaper in Finland, and *Nyt/Now*, its weekly supplement; *Keskisuomalainen*, a daily newspaper serving primarily Central Finland; a web review on the site of a large Finnish TV channel, MTV3; and the music website *NRGM/ Nuorgam* that offers articles, reviews and other material on music. The reviews are originally in Finnish, and I have translated the selected quotes into English. The reviews of Nickelback in Finnish media encompass 11 reviews, of which seven critique albums, one is a single review ('Photograph') and three critique Nickelback's live performance in Helsinki in 2012.

For the research material, the volumes of *Soundi* and *Rumba* from 2000 to 2014 were examined. In addition, the electronic archives of *Soundi*, *Rytmi*, *Rumba*, *NRGM*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Nyt* and *Inferno* were checked with the search term 'nickelback'. In addition, relevant articles (i.e., not simply mentions of the band in album charts) were taken as secondary, contextualizing material, focusing on other artists' reviews where Nickelback is mentioned. The selected time frame of 2000–2014 aims at covering Nickelback's rise to fame with 'How You Remind Me' in 2002 and their success from that point forward. Reviews were searched on a broad scale, focusing on music media, relatively large newspapers and other sources with wide visibility (such as MTV3). Youth magazines, whose target group is distinctly younger people, children and teenagers, were excluded from the search (such as *Suosikki*), as their discourse, function and approach to musical artists is seen to be different than music media and the cultural sections of newspapers, which in turn can be considered to form and legitimize a certain canon for adult consumers.

To form a manageable size and logically delimited corpus for qualitative analysis, the research data was focused on Finnish sources from within a particular timeframe. As a qualitative study, this does not follow the logic of surveys. The results cannot be generalized as representing the global reception of Nickelback; rather, the aim is to extrapolate how Nickelback's Finnish reception relates to the wider issue of its negative treatment (cf. Alasuutari 1995: 155–57). However, as a result of globalization and, for example, the fact that some articles and interviews, especially at the start of the period under research, have been taken from Anglo-American magazines such as *Q* and translated into Finnish, the critics may also partly mimic the aesthetic values of the Anglo-American music press. In addition, the backlash against Nickelback is an

extensively mediatized phenomenon, reported widely in the Finnish music media, and so the negative attitude towards the band in Finland may partly stem from an international attitude.

In this article, authenticity is seen discursively: it is constructed or deconstructed in language, through arguments, logic and word choices. It 'does not inhere in any combination of musical sounds', but rather is 'ascribed' to a certain range of music (Moore 2002: 210) – a cultural construction constantly used to legitimize certain forms of music (Mäkelä 2002: 156–57). Besides a key concept in rock, authenticity has also been a 'core value of Western society for centuries', providing rock with the foundation on which its seriousness has been built (Keightley 2001:131). The discourse of authenticity is often constructed on oppositions: honest against false, the original against the copy, or subculture against mainstream, including both music and people in the process (Middleton 2006: 200). Thus, authentic communities produce authentic music, whereas inauthentic music is made by 'cynics', for 'consumers mired in false consciousness' (Middleton 2006: 200).

Starting out from social constructivism and discourse analysis, the viewpoint of this article is that 'texts as elements of social events have causal effects' – what is said about Nickelback and what type of argumentation is used when discussing their (in)authenticity, engendering changes (Fairclough 2003: 8). In the material, the word 'authenticity' need not appear in the text for the text to construct a discourse of authenticity nonetheless, since '[m]any rock critics find authenticity suspect as a concept, but it nevertheless seeps into their writing [...] Even if the term 'authenticity' does not show up, invocations of 'real' or 'genuine' music often do [...]' (McLeod 2002: 104–05).

Of the many different, partly intersecting authenticity discourses presented in previous research, the most essential for this article are firstly the six types of authenticity proposed by Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg (2010: 469–477): (1) 'folkloric authenticity', (2) 'authenticity as self-expression', (3) 'authenticity as negation', (4) 'authentic inauthenticity', (5) 'body authenticity' and (6) 'authenticity as transcendence of the everyday'. Secondly, Allan Moore (2002) presents his own three-part-system of authenticities: 1<sup>st</sup> person, 2<sup>nd</sup> person and 3<sup>rd</sup> person authenticity, also named as authenticity of expression, authenticity of experience and authenticity of execution, respectively. Thirdly, Timothy Taylor (1997) suggests authenticities of primality,

positionality and emotionality. The variety of discourses illustrates different musical genres' tendency to understand the concept of authenticity diversely; the several competing definitions of authenticity in popular culture also change over time (e.g., Mäkelä 2002: 156; Strong 2011: 22; Keightley 2001: 131). Thus, Nickelback's genre is also an important factor in the analysis and will be explored later.

### **Nickelback and its reviews**

The Canadian Nickelback, who started out as a Metallica and Led Zeppelin cover band, was formed in 1995 ('Nickelback'). They have released eight studio albums and their worldwide sales have been estimated at over 50 million (Graff 2011). In Finland, Nickelback has sold gold twice, both in 2012: with their album *Here and Now* (sales 17,227) and with the single 'When We Stand Together' (sales 5,782), which was the ninth most sold foreign single in Finland in 2012 (IFPI Finland 201-[a], 201-[b]).

Nickelback's lyrics form a polarity between the hedonistic themes of sex and alcohol, and love songs (Fetterley n.d.), the former being characteristic of classic heavy metal (Hecker 2012: 22; Weinstein 2000: 36–37), the latter from the realm of pop. The discursive combination is similar to Bon Jovi's successful recipe in the 1980s, combining traits from the genres of metal, rock and pop, thus appealing to a wider audience (Walser 1993: 120). Additionally, some songs' themes, such as domestic violence ('Never Again'), are more in line with grunge aesthetics, which focused on 'generalized negative experiences' (Strong 2011: 19). Sonically, the music incorporates many intersecting elements, from metal and grunge to country, for instance, in the newest album flirting even with rap and funk. Kahn-Harris (2007: 1) and Strong (2011: 20) consider Nickelback a grunge-influenced band; its music is further stated to sound like classic metal and hard rock from the 1970s and 1980s (Kahn-Harris 2007: 1); it is notable that they are included in the *Encyclopaedia of Heavy Metal* (Phillips and Cogan 2009: 178), although categorised as heavy rock. In Wikipedia (2015), their music is described as 'various genres, including hard rock, post-grunge, alternative rock, alternative metal, heavy metal and pop rock'. Thus, not surprisingly, writers have struggled

to place Nickelback in one specific genre – the reviews analysed mention genres such as grunge, hard rock, ‘meteor-rock’, stadium rock and pop.

Canadianness is one contextual factor affecting a band’s authenticity, according to Barry K. Grant (1986: 118–20), who argues that Canadian rock is inauthentic in principle since, unlike American rock, it ‘lacks the experiences, the roots’ that have given birth to the genre, and hence it lacks an authentic voice – a view, criticized by Testa and Shedden (2002), that begs the question of whether any non-American rock music can be authentic. Contrastingly, according to Will Straw, Canadians have succeeded especially in the genres of hard rock and singer-songwriters, while an auteurist character has characterized national popular music history, with the distinct careers of acts such as Rush (1993: 59–60). Scott Henderson presents a three-part division of the periods in Canadian popular music history, with the current one comprising critically acclaimed bands such as Arcade Fire that do not need to either highlight or hide their Canadianness (2008: 313). However, Nickelback’s image may better match Grant’s claim, where the key to success is to become indistinguishable from American music (1986: 122). In their music videos, very few signifiers of their Canadianness are present except in the video of ‘Photograph’, which focuses on the town of Hanna. Compared, for example, to a fellow Canadian, Devin Townsend, who is well established in the metal genre and whose live performances have entailed hockey uniforms in Canada’s colours and decorating the stage with the Canadian flag, Nickelback’s image is not explicitly Canadian but rather a more generalized impression of a North American band. Similarly, their lyrics and video of ‘Edge of a Revolution’ are localized to a US environment, with allusions to US phenomena such as Occupy and NSA, speaking from an insider perspective of ‘we’ rather than commenting from the outside. Furthermore, it is arguable whether, in its Finnish reception, Nickelback’s nationality carries the same kind of connotations as it would in the Canadian or American music press, – the only evaluative mention of their Canadianness in the material compliments the band for being less patriotic than similar American acts (Vuoti 2008).

In the table below, I have collected all the Finnish reviews and any associated grades that were found. Additionally, three reviews that discuss Nickelback’s first live performance in Finland and one single review are also included in the research material. As can be seen, Nickelback’s critical reception has been poor, apart from Vuoti’s 5-star review.

<i>Silver Side Up:</i>	<i>Rating</i>
Pertti Ojala, <i>Soundi</i> , 1/2002	*
<i>The Long Road:</i>	
Pertti Ojala, <i>Soundi</i> , 11/2003	*
Tuomas Pekkala, <i>Rumba</i> , 19/2003	*
<i>Dark Horse:</i>	
Heikki Romppainen, <i>Nyt</i> , 5.12.2008	*
Sauli Vuoti, <i>Soundi</i> , 12/2008	*****
<i>Here and Now:</i>	
Toni van der San, MTV3, 24.11.2011	**½
Markus Hilden, NRGM, 29.11.2011	41/100 [scale 1–100]
Jose Riikonen, <i>Nyt</i> , 1/2012	*
<i>Best of Nickelback, vol. 1:</i>	
Joni Kling, NRGM, 11.11.2013	15/100
<i>No fixed address:</i>	
Saku Schildt, <i>Nyt</i> , 14.11.2014	*

The concept of 'bad music' is essential when discussing music criticism. The need for distinctions exists in rock culture, which has been historically characterized by its 'processes of exclusion' (Keightley 2001: 111). This differentiation, condemning something as 'bad' is also an important part of the pleasure we receive from music consumption (Frith 2004: 29). Intertwining the aesthetic and the ethical, visible already in the concepts of 'good' and 'bad' music (Frith 1996: 72),

is encompassed in the concept of authenticity: “good” rock music must also be somehow “just” or “true” (Keightley 2001: 132–33). This begs the question of whether some of the hatred expressed against Nickelback is so intense because the band has also been judged ethically.

### Copying and the Ghosts of Music Past

In his live review, Ramsay (2012) compares Nickelback to a funfair ride, a well-oiled machine; however, when one sees and recognizes the wires and parts of this machine, the illusion vanishes. The wires and parts in Ramsay’s case are Nickelback’s predecessors, such as Nirvana and Metallica, from whom a ‘Frankenstein’s monster’, i.e. Nickelback, has been skilfully crafted (2012). Ramsay compares Kroeger to James Hetfield with all the alcohol referencing, guitar selection, wardrobe and even the stance with legs wide – Romppainen (2012) makes the same comparison, calling Kroeger a ‘lite’ version of Hetfield. With regard to Nirvana, Ramsay tells the story of his moment of disillusionment when first hearing Nickelback’s breakthrough hit ‘How You Remind Me’. The lyrics of the song touched him, although he still manages to include a jab at Kroeger’s hairstyle at that time: ‘I understand you, ramen-Jesus. You sing to me, straight into my soul.’ However, the bridge of the song, repeating ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, no no’, broke the tender connection, reminded him of Nirvana, being ‘scarily close to that classic “hello, hello, how low” progression’ (Ramsay 2012). Imitating other artists to one’s own gain questions the authenticity of a performer. The media accounts of Kroeger intentionally studying chord progressions and structures of hit songs before composing *Silver Side Up* make matters worse; Ramsay (2012) also remembers to mention this trivia, which contradicts the Romantic notion according to which ‘the creative process itself is seen not as a craft or a learned skill but as the response of suffering or mad artists’ (Weinstein 2004b: 192). Additionally, van der San (2011) also refers to the similarity between Nickelback’s songs and those of the Scorpions, Guns N’ Roses and Skid Row. Copying other artists as well as themselves – van der San (2011) sees a resemblance in all their hit singles’ melodies – can be interpreted as contradicting the Romantic ideal of the artist as a creative genius who possesses originality. Sheer mimicry is not commendable, for instance, in metal, which values freedom and self-expression instead (Wallach and Levine 2011: 121). Powers (2004: 238) asks if unoriginality is



a problem, as ‘beautiful borrowing reaffirms that all music has come from other music’. However, she reminds one of the value of innovation: ‘Borrowing has always been acceptable in pop, so long as it’s done cleverly’ (2004: 238–39). Nickelback’s ‘Someday’, with its ‘identical tempo, instrumentation, harmonic progression, and song structure’ as that in ‘How You Remind Me’, together with both songs resembling numerous other songs, cannot be seen as transformative or inventive intertextuality (Scherzinger 2014: 173–74), let alone as originality.

The ghost of grunge makes matters worse – perhaps because the borrowing is not just from any act but Nirvana and especially the late Kurt Cobain, among others, the punishment is far more severe. Associating the band, or Kroeger, with Cobain, or Eddie Vedder, seems appalling (Warwick 2009: 352). As Schildt states in his review, ‘The rebellion movement started by Nirvana and co. blunted into puffy stadium rock in time’ (2014). The hope and memory of grunge can be seen to be soiled in the worst kind of way in the hands of bands such as Nickelback, who represent everything grunge was against, not least of all commercialism (Warwick 2009: 352). For instance, Billboard’s biography of the band describes them as ‘slick, commercially minded post-grunge’ (Leahey n.d.).

Post-grunge can be one element that diminishes Nickelback’s chances of being perceived as authentic, as the whole genre is seen as having a problematic relationship to authenticity due to its past. After the commercial success of grunge bands, like Nirvana and Pearl Jam, record labels started signing bands with a similar sound (such as Bush and Candlebox) (Grierson 2012?). This was seen partly as an attempt to ‘rip off’ Seattle Sound, and so many critics dismissed these new bands, labelling them almost pejoratively ‘post-grunge’ (Grierson 2012?). Similarly, ‘alternative rock’ became a misnomer, ‘seen within the metal subculture as empty derivations of grunge [...] without the perceived personal authenticity of Eddie Vedder or Kurt Cobain’ (Klypchak 2007: 11).

The inauthenticity of the genre affects value judgements, because ‘one listens to the music for clues to something else, to what makes the genre at issue valuable as a genre in the first place’ (Frith 1996: 89). The negative reaction to Nickelback could be interpreted as opposing the homogenization of grunge, of destroying or diluting the music that once was seen as the epitome of authenticity, into something bland in the name of a larger target audience. The problematics of post-grunge can also be seen in the contextualizing material in quotes where Nickelback is lumped

together with other nu-metal and post-grunge bands into one pile that represents bad, commercial and unimaginative music: 'Inculinkinnickelbusparkback' (Tolonen 2006), from a review of Hoobastank, or the frustration of Riekkii (2002): 'I'm fed up to the back teeth with nickelbacks, incubus', drains, creeds and all that'. The issue is not the one band in question but the wider genre phenomenon that is seen as inauthentic as a whole. It seems only logical that Nickelback has tried to disavow the (post)grunge label placed upon it (Warwick 2009: 353).

Furthermore, grunge is not necessarily the only ghost disturbing Nickelback's reception. Like Elvis Presley, who utilized many already existing musical, lyrical and performative elements, re-articulating them successfully within a new formula (Middleton 1985: 8–9), Nickelback can be read as also attempting to articulate itself within metal discourse by using certain tropes of metal such as hedonistic lyrical themes, and sonic traits such as heavy riffs, distorted guitars and virtuosic solos (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris and LeVine 2011: 6; Walser 1993: 41, 50, 53), and also by featuring Dimebag Darrell of Pantera in 'Side of a Bullet'. One contextual element is the record label Roadrunner Records, with whom the band signed in 1999; the compilation album *The Best of Nickelback Volume 1* (2013) was the last released on the label in the United States. The label has many established metal bands on its roster, such as Opeth, Slipknot and Gojira, whose authenticity is rarely questioned. However, '[i]t can be deeply insulting to the notion of authenticity in the metal community when on its fringes a piece of music is subsumed into household culture' (Scott 2011: 235). Nickelback's more mainstream music style and submission to commercial success could be interpreted as problematic among its label colleagues and the metal context, which is apparent for instance in Ojala's condescending remark on Nickelback 'even imagin[ing] itself as a metal band' on the track 'Because of You' (2003). The attempt to articulate within the metal genre is rejected, leaving Nickelback on the fringes of metal.

The evaluation of authenticity should be contextualized in terms of genre expectations, since situating a band within a specific genre simultaneously determines the imagined ideal with which the band is compared (Fetterley 2008). According to Peterson (1997: 220), in popular culture, authenticity most often refers to 'being *believable* relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being *original*, that is not being an imitation of the model'. Nickelback's odd combination of hedonistic party songs, introspective texts about personal anguish and social

themes, political or self-empowering anthems and sensitive ballads is inter-contradictory. Similarly, their musical elements of fast tapping guitar solos, heavy riffs, paralleled with country-styled acoustic guitars and harmonics, and heavily produced sounds with digital audio effects produce a confusing combination. According to Fetterley (2008), this disagreement over genre contributes to Nickelback's negative reception. The quest to articulate in terms of multiple genres results in unclear genre expectations and confusion over what 'model' to follow.

### Commercialism

One of the recurring themes in the reviews is commercialism, seen as be embodied e.g. in plays on the radio. The songs are described as 'tailored for playlists' (Romppainen 2008), and it is suggested that the music's main function is filling out the heavy rock quota of format radio stations (Ojala 2002). According to Friman (2005), 'Nickelback makes over-populist and [...] horrifying radio rock'. To summarize the negative attitude towards radio exposure, Vuoti (2008) sarcastically comments on his positive review that 'of course it is a shame for a rock band if they are played on the radio', criticizing the (mainly) anti-commercialist bashing Nickelback has been targeted with.

One edge of this criticism implicitly questions Nickelback's motives for making music. Their songs are 'optimally safe', where 'everything is up to par with the requirements of the genre', and which create 'an illusion of hard rock' (Ojala 2002). The music is described as being 'fake' (Riikonen 2012), 'forced' (Hilden 2011) and 'performed through gritted teeth' (Riikonen 2012). Van der San (2011) claims that Nickelback is 'calculatingly hit-focused'; Ojala (2003) accuses them of 'laughing all the way to the bank'. Overall, the descriptions imply that the songs are not genuine self-expression written willingly, but instead forced and made for commercial reasons.

In the live reviews, where Ramsay uses the metaphor of a funfair ride, Nickelback is also compared to other commodities: a happy airplane flight (Romppainen 2012), an action movie or a hamburger meal (Lehti 2012). The performance offers consumable entertainment for a couple of hours, but offers no memories or real experiences (Romppainen 2012), an observation that echoes the distinction between commerce and art. According to Adornian criticism, music that welcomes commodification is inauthentic, whereas authentic music opposes it (Paddison 2004:

212). Similarly, to be seen as authentic, an artefact must appear to be 'uncorrupted by Western capitalism', although depending on just that for its dissemination (Cobb 2014: 5–6). In Nickelback's case, I doubt whether the quality of their music is so much worse than their peers that it would justify the range of criticism that it has received, given that some compositions are described as 'excellent' (Hilden 2011), and their riffs and vocalism praised (Ojala 2002). However, the reviews are still negative, suggesting that their products deemed as 'sell-outs' or 'fake' receive such an assessment not on aesthetic grounds 'but out of their relationship to money' (Cobb 2014: 6).

According to Catherine Strong (2011), in the genre of grunge, commercial success is said to compromise or destroy the authenticity of the genre. Of the six different types of authenticity Weisethaunet and Lindberg present, Strong (2011: 22–23) introduces Authenticity as Negation as one of the most crucial ones regarding grunge. This type of authenticity is about artistic independence, the artist's refusal to surrender to marketing forces, and the artist's lack of concern for money or commercial success; its counterpoint is the accusation of selling out, of making music with the intent to make money (Strong 2011: 22–23). Similarly, in metal '[a]uthenticity is equated [...] with disinterest in commercial appeal, especially as reflected in a radio hit' (Weinstein 2000: 154). The accusations that Nickelback is a 'sell-out' or commercially calculating correlate with the discourse of Authenticity as Negation, or Taylor's (1997: 22–23) similar discourse of authenticity as positionality. This discourse is also linked to the authenticity-as-expression discourse (Moore 2002: 214), when submitting to marketing forces causes them to not create honest material but instead try to trick their way into commercial success. The statements from the reviews can be read to imply that to gain commercial success, Nickelback forcedly writes calculating hit material offering listeners only easy illusions of the real thing, not self-expressive, genuine pieces of art, failing to meet the genre expectations of both grunge and metal. The 'commercial nature of the group' is seen as grounds for dismissal of a band in American rock criticism (McLeod 2001: 55), which resonates with the descriptions of Nickelback.

Popularity in itself is a problematic phenomenon in criticism. In cultural history, critics were split into two groups – those on the side of the artist and those on the side of the audience – the former regarded the audience's approval as a sign of a bad performance, which remains a feature in criticism; 'the audience liked it' can still be standard in a scolding review (Frith 1996: 64–65).

The approval of their large audience can be interpreted as proof that Nickelback is of low quality. Considering the further baggage the history of grunge lays on Nickelback and the entire post-grunge genre, the relationship to success becomes even more complicated. However, not all successful artists are despised, which begs the question of '[h]ow critics distinguish "good" multiplatinum artists from "bad" multiplatinum artists' (McLeod 2002: 96). According to Keightley, rock culture 'patrols popularity for inauthentic and therefore undeserved success', while 'see[ing] mass success as the birthright of those who deserve it' (2001: 132). Rock culture's rejection of mass taste and culture (Keightley 2001) could contribute to seeing Nickelback's success as inauthentic and undeserved, representing the 'bad' taste of the masses.

### Dullness

One recurring theme in the reviews is dullness: Nickelback is 'deadly boring' (Schildt 2014), repetitive (Pekkala 2003; van der San 2011) and generic (Ramsay 2012), paralleling Adorno's (1994) accusations of popular music being standardized, only pseudo-individualized, and 'pre-digested' for the listener. Dullness is connected to lack of danger, which in turn leads to the music being predictable (Hilden 2011), uninteresting (Romppainen 2008, 2012) and offering no challenges to the listener (Ojala 2002). All this can be paralleled with unoriginality, which contradicts the values of '[e]xperimentation, inventiveness, and musical rule breaking' connected with critically praised artists (McLeod 2002: 106). Lack of danger is seen as a negative trait; for example, Schildt (2014) describes Nickelback being known as 'the epitome of edgeless rock who has wiped heavy music clean of all rebellion, passion, sense of danger and edge.' Comparably, 'being bland, boring, or middle-of-the-road' goes against the traditional union of rock and counterculture and rebellion (e.g., McLeod 2002: 108–09), where 'a sense of rebellion, or, at least, excitement' is valued (McLeod 2002: 101). Dullness is further linked to the above-mentioned commercialism: Mutt Lange, who produced *Dark Horse*, is depicted as also having successfully smoothed out the edges of Bryan Adams and Def Leppard to suit big markets (Romppainen 2008) – implying that the edgelessness of Nickelback is due to commercial thinking. Furthermore, although using musical tropes from the metal genre, Nickelback can be seen to lack (at least) one

essential element of metal that would enable it to properly integrate into the genre: commitment to transgression (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2011: 6, 14). Its mainstream success is antithetical to metal's countercultural and controversial image (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris and LeVine 2011).

Lack of danger is linked to the harmlessness of the musicians' personas: Ramsay (2012) describes them as 'nicely clean' in a supposedly negative tone, given that he later calls them pejoratively 'fucking H&M's Black Label Society', referring to the contrast between the performance styles of Zakk Wylde and Nickelback. In particular, the excessive references to alcohol in their lyrics, combined with Nickelback's live performance where they themselves did not drink, frustrate Ramsay, who demands that Kroeger, too, practice what he preaches – 'Also Jesus suffered for us, so did Hetfield – take a sip' (2012). Similar views of demanding proper correspondence between the artists' lives and their music are suggested in other reviews, underlining the contradiction between the band's or Kroeger's personas and the themes they sing about. Van der San (2011) compares Kroeger to Axl Rose and Vince Neil, for instance, with Kroeger and Nickelback losing the battle, being 'too clean and safe' in comparison. Thus, Nickelback and Kroeger are seen as lacking the authenticity to sing rock 'n' roll songs that try to express the danger of rock 'n' roll. The lack of correspondence between the lyrics and the actual person and lifestyle of the lyricist can be interpreted as dishonesty, contradicting the demand for self-expression, according to which one expresses emotions with integrity.

## Truth

The discussion on correct correspondence of lifestyle and art above connects with the value of truth, which can further be associated with authenticity: an artwork's ties to truth give it authenticity and value (Jones 2008: 15, 35). Contrastingly, Nickelback's music is portrayed as forced (Hilden 2011; Riikonen 2012) and as 'hypocritical bullshit performed through gritted teeth' (Riikonen 2012). Riikonen continues that Nickelback's ballads in the album 'make you cry because of their affectation, not because of their poignancy' (2012), as if Nickelback shows no real sentiment, but only an illusion of the real thing, thus making the ballads' feelings fake. Hilden (2011) continues on the theme of hypocrisy, painting a sarcastic picture of Kroeger, while quoting

Nickelback's lyrics from 'When We Stand Together': 'In the midst of his collection of quad bikes Kroeger has figured that hey, should we restrain this consumption feast'. I interpret all of these statements as relating to lies and dishonesty. In her analysis of Nickelback, Leanne Fetterley (2008) sees grunge as posited as an authentic ideal, against which Nickelback's sincerity 'fails as a strategy of authenticity'. Warwick (2009: 355) reads Kroeger's 'gravelly vocal timbre as signifier of earnestness', part of a continuum including Bruce Springsteen and Robert Plant, but one that has possibly lost its charm, as Fetterley (2008) suggests: Cobain and Vedder's 'coarse vocal timbre' signified authenticity, but in the case of Kroeger, it is only seen as 'poor imitation', as 'playing a part', as inauthenticity.

According to Frith, the most common complaint regarding bad music is that it is inauthentic, insincere – 'as if people expect music to mean what it says', judging the music as if it were synonymous with a person's sincerity (2004: 28). Besides the accusations of the dishonesty of the lyrics and music, the theme of lies can be applied to the band's personas as well, as they are accused of trying to be something they are not – of 'striving to play a credible rock band' (Romppainen 2012). Lehti (2012) comments that their live gestures and grimaces, 'picked straight out of a textbook of rock posing', eventually make one laugh.

The dishonesty of expressions eradicates authentic meaning from the music. For instance, Ojala (2003) states that Nickelback 'successfully continues to make the most noise with empty barrels.' Hilden (2011) continues, 'the soul is missing'; according to Schildt (2014), 'Edge of a Revolution' 'infuriates with its hollow bluster'. Ojala also uses quotation marks sarcastically to express the emptiness behind apparent expressions of emotion: Kroeger roars "'heavily'" and "'emotionally'" (2003). These statements can be read to contradict e.g. the authenticity of expression (Moore 2002: 214), where the utterance is expected to possess integrity – in comparison, Nickelback is presented as having nothing to say, or only pretending to have a message.

### **Bad audiences and the threat of sentimentalism**

Audience is one element in criticism that could cast out certain artists, on the grounds of their 'bad' audience. For example, critics' reaction to artists like Journey and Rick Springfield, who have a strong female audience, 'may be based as much on aesthetic reasons as on the need to carve out a distinct identity for themselves in opposition to these artists' audiences' (McLeod 2002: 102). Besides the 'perceived authenticity of motivation', the authenticity of intended audience is one criterion by which to judge an artist (Jones 2008: 41). As for Nickelback, suspicion of their audience may be one element in the negative reactions the band has had. In the analysed reviews, the abject audience that is cast out is for example school shooters, one's ex, Home Depot customers (Kling 2013) or high schoolers (Friman 2005). In Ramsay's live review (2012) the situation is different as he describes the actual audience at the live event; however, he does not do it in very flattering terms, thus constructing a specific image of Nickelback's fans: panicky little girls, tough guys in print t-shirts and leather jackets bought from supermarkets, sturdy and bald men, and preteens with their parents. The abject audience can be categorized into two groups: inauthentic (e.g., little girls) – as a 'teenage girl is the most contemptible fan of all' (Warwick 2009: 352) – and undesirable, with attributes the writers do not want to possess (e.g. school shooters).

The problem of audience can be associated with sentimentalism, where, too, the problem is the 'wrong' audience, i.e. women: "'sentimentalism" is a criticism often levelled at products aimed at, or produced by, women' (McLeod 2002: 107). In Nickelback's case, the problem is not the 'unimaginative rocking', but the 'emotional pathos songs tailored for playlists [...]', which lead to rejection, instead of mere indifference (Romppainen 2008). Schildt (2014) firmly considers schmaltz a derogatory term: 'it's difficult to make your way through the syrupy third track'. Meier places Nickelback in the bodily category of 'arena rock', suggesting that disdain of the band is caused by their excessive sentimentality which crosses 'the boundaries of genre' (2008: 248, 241). Sentimentality has been the 'cardinal aesthetic sin' for over a century; describing a work as sentimental inevitably leads to its condemnation – 'To be sentimental is to be kitsch, phony, exaggerated, manipulative, self-indulgent, hypocritical, cheap and clichéd' (Wilson 2007: 122). Furthermore, if Nickelback is examined in relation to metal's aesthetic, softness is a form of expression forbidden to the vocalist, as it contradicts the value of power in heavy metal (Weinstein 2000: 26–27).



However, according to Vuoti (2008), the ‘soft, radio-friendly tunes’ that jump out from the wholeness of the album may be a ticket to autonomy: by writing sentimental ballads, Nickelback buys itself the freedom to make the rest of the songs – the heavier tracks – as they wish. Vuoti (2008) states, ‘With a few concessions it guarantees itself the freedom to make totally original music and do it at an extremely high level.’ The review suggests that by ‘play[ing] the game skilfully’, i.e. making sweet radio-friendly songs tactically and thus possibly abandoning authentic self-expression, Nickelback gains freedom of artistic expression. This counter-discourse to the strict demand for authenticity is examined next.

### **Fake fake animals – challenging the dominant discourse**

There are other instances of this counter-discourse, which can be read as commenting sardonically on the rockist obsession with authenticity. Vuoti (2008) sarcastically criticizes rock’s undying hatred of commercial success:

It has become the fate of Nickelback to be the eternal bad band. The one that makes inauthentic music, dishonours rock with their success and makes money out of people’s stupidity. It is of course a shame for a rock band if it gets played on the radio.

Van der San’s review (2011), although otherwise critical, has similar tones: Nickelback ‘repeats the same hit format from album to album, but gets bashed for it, unlike AC/DC that has pretty much been doing the same song over and over for 40 years already.’ Schildt (2014) sardonically comments on how Nickelback has become the object of ridicule in rock circles, and how music blogs have made an art out of mocking Nickelback; Lehti (2012) describes the media attention before Nickelback’s live show in Finland as focusing on ‘trivial laughing at the mediocrity of the band and praising one’s own sophisticated taste in music’. Music culture’s elitist snobbery is derided in turn.

It is intriguing to read these statements rooting for a new kind of honesty – if we use the concept of authenticity as a demand for truth (e.g. Jones 2008: 15) – of rock culture being more

honest about its ties with commercialism. Barker and Taylor (2007: 327–28) introduce the idea of ‘fake fake’ presented by the sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick, wondering what would happen if all the fake animals of Disneyland were transformed into real ones, and how people would then react to these ‘fake fake’ animals. In Vuoti’s review, something similar can be read into the review: Nickelback is the official ‘bad’ band; what if there is something ‘real’ and incorruptible behind that – what if instead of fake, they are fake fake?

As Baudrillard (1994) argues that Disneyland exists to highlight the ‘real’ nature of its external world and to hide the fact that the ‘real’ is as simulated as Disneyland, Nickelback can be read as serving the same function with regard to the music press: its artificiality is highlighted so that the rest would seem more real, and to conceal the perception that all music is artificial – that ‘there is nothing really to be authentic about’ (Testa and Shedden 2002: 182). Eco, discussing American culture in particular, states that in order to reach the ‘real thing’, an ‘absolute fake’ must be fabricated (1990: 8). Similarly, rock critics ‘seem to need an Other’ (Weinstein 2004a: 305), for example teen idols such as New Kids on the Block, who are considered crucial in establishing the authenticity of other performers (Marshall 1997: 171), as the discourse of authenticity is ‘dependent on the existence of such examples’ (Marshall 1997: 173). Nickelback can be seen as part of a dichotomy, providing the antithesis of authenticity, to which ‘authentic’ performers can then be compared.

However, when Vuoti praises Nickelback, he does it according to traditional ideas of authenticity: their sense of melody is ‘personal’ and ‘deviates from the mainstream’; their riff-making is ‘anything but commercial’ (2008). These statements exclude mainstream and commercialism from Nickelback, which parallels the ideas of authenticity of negation. Furthermore, they stress originality, an important factor in authenticity as self-expression and the authenticity of Romanticism (Keightley 2001). The perceived freedom from authenticity is an illusion; eventually the value of Nickelback is still justified by means of the same traditional views, entailing originality and uncommercialism.

Nevertheless, the wider discussion on the subject has begun to challenge the dominant discourse, suggesting for example ‘subverting accepted aesthetic hierarchies’, freeing us to value e.g. ‘soft’ or ‘sweet’ music (McLeod 2002: 109), and abandoning the demand that music be life-

changing (McLeod 2002: 110). Powers (2004: 237) argues that future thinking needs more tools to grasp the 'nondescript', 'unexceptional' and 'mediocre' in music, since, with the scale of record production today, anyone succeeding in attracting the public's attention cannot actually be mediocre. After the potential liberation of one's likings, 'taste can seem [...] more like a fantasy world in which we get to romance or at least fool around with many strangers', Wilson (2007: 154) proposes, resulting in 'a less rigid, more inclusive, conception of popular music in which everyone potentially has agency and is invited to join the party' (McLeod 2002: 110). These statements suggest a desire for strict popular music aesthetics to yield to more diverse tastes.

## Conclusions

In the analysed reviews of Nickelback in Finnish media, old ideas of authenticity are still present at large. The concept of a creative genius demands originality and constant evolving, which in Nickelback's case turns into accusations of being predictable and calculating. The inverse of their perceived dullness is the value that rock should be dangerous, edgy and definitely not middle-of-the-road. The accusations of commercialism and market manoeuvring, especially with the extra baggage of grunge, suggest that anti-commercialism and authenticity of negation or of positionality are still valued. The alleged dishonesty of expression and the lack of correspondence between their music and personas indicate that music should be honest and correctly express the emotions and values of its creator. In this case, demands for originality, subversiveness, uncommercialism, correspondence and truth affect and construct the discourse of authenticity, while justifying Nickelback's perceived inauthenticity and concomitant valuelessness. Following Frith (2004: 31), Nickelback provokes anger because of what it is *not* – honest, self-expressing, anti-commercial, and dangerous – what music *should* be. The anger is about the music's 'ethical rather than technical shortcomings' (Frith 2004: 31–32), the problem not in their skills but in dishonouring what music could be and could represent at its best. Other, international analyses of Nickelback have drawn similar conclusions especially regarding the genre of grunge and its requirements (Fetterley 2008; Warwick 2009); in addition, most of the traits match the aesthetic

criteria of US rock journalism (McLeod 2001, 2002). Thus, the results of the analysis also correlate with findings beyond the Finnish context.

The title bar of the magazine *Rumba's* webpage states 'Rumba.fi – Avoid bad music!' This represents well the role of rock media as a gatekeeper and a guardian of taste. What is at stake with authenticity is not so much the band's popularity, since a negative critical reception has only limited power over record sales (McLeod 2001: 57), but the rock journals' credibility as the representatives of a knowing, select rock community, working against the mainstream. Authenticity has usually 'been placed in opposition to commercially successful music, preserving the critic's position as uncorrupted and as the member of a select, hip group, still linked to the counter-cultural past' (Weinstein 2004a: 303). Drawing on Moore's (2002) thinking, I would argue that, by nullifying Nickelback's authenticity, critics are actually authenticating themselves. If critics give up on authenticity, they merge with the mainstream, thus losing their countercultural capital.

Finally, Nickelback's unsuccessful attempt to articulate to multiple genres by lyrical and musical means illustrates rock criticism's tendency to demand invention and evolution but in the right, moderate amount and with a suitably stable, categorizable identity. Nickelback is too much of everything to be enough of something. They follow genre expectations *too well*, which is seen as empty imitation, but also *not well enough*, which is read as commercial tactics and as a lack of a stable and sincere identity. Remaining on the right side of authenticity resembles a near-impossible high-wire act. The media reception of Nickelback exemplifies the perils of failing in this quest.

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