This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

[http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30064794](http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30064794)

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

**Copyright**: 2014, Queensland University of Technology
This paper will use the popular television character, Dexter Morgan, to interrogate the relationship between self and persona, and unsettle the distinction between the two terms. This operation will enable me to raise a series of questions about the critical vocabulary and scholarly agenda of the nascent discipline of persona studies, which, I argue, needs to develop a critical genealogy of the term “persona.” This paper makes a modest contribution to such a project by drawing attention to some key questions regarding the discourse of authenticity in persona studies. For those not familiar with the show, *Dexter* portrays the life of a serial killer who only kills other serial killers. This is because Dexter, under the tutelage of his deceased father, develops a code that enables him to find a “socially useful” purpose for his homicidal impulses—by exclusively targeting other killers he rationalises his own deadly acts. Dexter necessarily leads a double life, which entails performing a series of normative social roles that conceal his true identity, and the murderous activities of his “dark passenger.” This apparent split between “true” self and “false” persona says a lot about popular conceptions of the performative nature of the self in contemporary culture, and provides a useful framework for unpacking some of the aporias generated by the concept of persona.

My aim in the present context is to substantiate the argument that persona studies needs to engage with the philosophical discourse of “self” and “authenticity” if it is to provide a convincing account of the status and function of persona today. The term “persona” derives from the classical Latin word for mask, and has its roots in the theatre of ancient Greece. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term thus:
1. An Assumed character or role, especially one adopted by an author in his or her writing, or by a performer.

2.a. as the aspect of a person’s character that is displayed to or perceived by others.

b. *Psychol.* In Jungian psychology: the outer or assumed aspect of character; a set of attitudes adopted by an individual to fit his or her perceived social role. Contrasted with *anima*.

For Jung the persona is “a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual” (305). We can see that all these usages share a theatrical or actorly dimension. Persona is something we adopt, display, or assume. Further, it is an external quality, which masks, presumably, that which is not assumed or displayed—the private self. Thus, persona is predicated on an opposition between inside and outside. Moreover, it is not a value neutral concept, but one, I will argue, that connotes a sense of “inauthenticity” through suggesting a division between self and role.

The “self” is a complicated word with a wide range of usages and connotations. The *OED* notes that when used with reference to a person the word refers to an essential entity.

3. Chiefly Philos. That which in a person is really and intrinsically he (in contradistinction to what is adventitious); the ego (often identified with the soul or mind as opposed to the body); a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness.

Of course both terms are further complicated by the way they function within specific specialised discourses. Jung’s use of the term “persona” is part of a complex psychological theory of personality, and the term “self” appears in a multitude of forms in a plethora of scholarly disciplines. The “self” is obviously a key concept in psychology and philosophy, where it is sometimes conflated with something called the subject, or discussed with reference to questions of personal identity. Michel Foucault’s project to track “the constitution of the subject across history which has led us up to the modern concept of the self” (202) is perhaps the most complex and rich body of work with which persona studies must reckon if it is to produce a distinctive account of the relationship
between persona and self. In broad terms, this paper advocates a loosely Foucauldian approach to understanding the relationship between self and persona, but defers a detailed encounter with Foucault's work on the subject (which requires a much larger canvas).

For the moment I want to focus on the status of authenticity in the self/persona relationship with specific reference to world of *Dexter*, which provides an accessible forum for examining a contemporary manifestation of the self/persona relationship with specific reference to the question of authenticity. *Dexter* conveys the division between authentic inner self and persona through the use of a first person narrative voice that provides a running commentary on the character’s thoughts, and exposes the gap between Dexter’s various social roles and his real sociopathic self. Dexter Morgan is, of course, an unreliable narrator, yet he is acutely aware of how others perceive him, and his narrative voice-over functions as a device to bind the viewer to the character’s first-person perspective. This is important because Dexter is devoid of empathy—he lacks the ability to feel genuine emotion, and conform to the social conventions that govern everyday activities, yet he is focus of audience identification. This means the voice-over must perform the work of making Dexter sympathetic.

The voice-over narration in *Dexter* is characterised by an obsession with the presentation of self, and the disparity between self and persona. In an early episode, Dexter's narrative voice proclaims a love of Halloween because it is “the one time of year when everyone wears a mask—not just me. People think it's fun to pretend you're a monster. Me, I spend my life pretending I'm not. Brother, friend, boyfriend—all part of my costume collection” (*Dexter* “Let’s Give the Boy a Hand”).

Dexter develops a series of social masks and routines to disguise his “real” self. He is compelled to develop a series of elaborate ruses to appear like a regular guy—a “normal” person who needs to perform a series of social roles. He thus becomes a studious observer of everyday life, and much of the show's appeal lies in the way he dissects the minutiae of human behavior in order to learn how be normal. Indeed, because he does not comprehend emotion he must learn how to read the external signs that convey care, love, interest, concern and so on—"I just don't understand all that emotion, which makes it tough to fake,” he declares (*Dexter*, “Popping Cherry”). Each social role requires a considerable degree of actorly preparation, and Dexter demonstrates what we might call, with Erving Goffman, a dramaturgical approach to everyday life (2).
For example, Dexter enters into a relationship with Rita, an ostensibly naïve, doe-eyed single mother of two children and a victim of domestic violence—he chooses her because he believes that she is as damaged as he is, and unlikely to challenge him too strongly—“Rita's ex-hubby, the crack addict, repeatedly raped her, knocked her around. Ever since then she's been completely uninterested in sex. That works for me!” (Dexter “Dexter”). Rita provides the perfect cover because she facilitates Dexter's construction of himself as a normal, heterosexual family man. However, in order to play this most paradigmatic normative role, he must learn how to play with children, and feign affection and intimacy. J. M. Tyree observes that Dexter “employs a fake-it-till-you-make-it strategy for imitating normal life” (82). Of course, he cannot maintain the role too long before Rita becomes suspicious, and aware of Dexter's repeated lies and evasions.

In short, Dexter dramatises what Goffman calls impression management—the character of Dexter Morgan must consistently “give off” signs of normativity (80). Goffman argues that we are all compelled to perform social roles in the manner of Dexter, and this perhaps accounts for why the show appealed to such a wide audience. In many ways, Dexter exposes normative behavior as an “act” that nobody can sustain no matter how hard they try. Dexter’s struggle to decode the conventions that govern everyday life make him a sympathetic character despite his obviously sociopathic tendencies. In other words we are all a little bit like Dexter insofar we must all perform social roles we may not find comfortable. Of course, the whole question of impression management in Dexter becomes even more complex if one considers Michael C. Hall’s celebrity persona and his performance as the titular character, but I do not have the space to pursue this line of inquiry in the present context.

So, Dexter is a consummate actor within his “everyday” world, and neatly, perhaps too neatly, confirms Goffman’s “dramaturgical” theory of the “self." In his essay, “Letter to a Poor Actor” David E. R. George provides a fascinating critique of Goffman from the perspective of a theatre studies scholar. George provocatively claims that Goffman was attracted to theatrical metaphors because of the “anti-theatrical prejudice” embedded within the western tradition. George cites Jonash Barish’s authoritative tome on this topic, which argues “that with infrequent exceptions, terms borrowed from the theatre—theatrical, operatic, melodramatic, stagey, etc.—tend to be hostile or belittling” (1).
Barish cites instances of this prejudice from Plato through to St Augustine and beyond, and George situates Goffman within this powerful tradition. He writes,

> the *teatrum mundi* metaphor has always been a recipe for paranoia, and in this respect Goffman appears merely to be continuing a long philosophical tradition: the actor-as-paranoiac puts on the maximum number of masks to protect a threatened and fragile self against the daily threat of intimacy, disrespect, deception. (353)

It is hardly surprising, then, that Dexter, a paranoid sociopath, stands as an exemplary instance of Goffman’s dramaturgical conception of the self, for *Dexter* is a show that consistently presents narratives about the relationship between the need to protect the “fragile” self through the construction of various personae. George also argues, with Lyman and Scott, that a “dramatistic” approach to understanding the world produces a cynical perspective because drama is predicated on the split between appearance and reality, nothing is what it appears to be, and nobody is what they appear to be (7).

The actor, traditionally, has always worn a mask in some form or another. From the literal masks worn by the actors in ancient Greece to the sophisticated make-up and prosthetic devices worn by today’s thespians, actors, even when they are supposedly playing themselves, expose the gap between self and persona. Arguably, the most challenging and provocative aspect of George’s theory of the actor for persona studies lies in his thesis about how the reviled art of the theatre, which has been pilloried for so many centuries, can function as a paradigm for authenticity. He cites Artaud and Grotowski as examples of two iconic figures that view the theatre as a sacred space that facilitates ‘close encounters of the authentic kind (George 361).

George attempts to rescue an authentic core identity, which he perceives to be under siege from the likes of Goffman, who proffers an “onion” model of the self. In George’s reading, Goffman produces a self without an essential, authentic core. This is hardly surprising given Goffman’s background. As an advocate of symbolic interactionism, a school of sociology that proposes that the self is produced as a result of various acts of socialisation, Goffman’s dramaturgical account of the self reinforces George Herbert Mead’s belief that “when a self does appear it always involves an experience of another; there could not be an experience of the self simply by itself” (195).

*Dexter* not only dramatises this self/other dynamic, but
also underscores the extent to which we, to use the
terminology of Benita Luckmann, inhabit a series of
“small life-worlds.” In other words, we lead a series of
part-time lives in part-time worlds—modern life, for
Luckmann writing in 1970, unfolds on multiple stages that
are not necessarily connected or operate according to the
same regulatory principles. She writes,

The multi-world existence of modern man requires frequent ‘gear-
shifting,’ As he moves from one small world into the next, he is
faced with at least marginally different expectations, requiring
different role performances in concert with different sets of people.

Dexter must negotiate a variety of different social roles,
each with different requirements and demands. He must,
therefore, cultivate a professional persona as a blood-
splatter analyst, and perform the personal roles of
brother, lover, husband, and so on. Each of these roles
occurs in a different “life world” and requires a different
presentation of self. Luckmann’s analysis of modern life
remains compelling despite being written more than 40
years ago, and she raises one of the most crucial
questions for persona studies: what “self,” if any,
functions as the executive “gear-shifter?” In Dexter, the
narrative voice, the voice behind the masks implies such
an essential entity—the true, authentic self, which is
consistent with Jung’s account of the relationship between
self and persona.

Despite a welter of critical theory that debunks the
possibility of an essential, self-identical, authentic self
(from Adorno’s anti-Heideggerean argument in The
Jargon of Authenticity to various post-structuralist
theories of subjectivity, especially Judith Butler’s
conception of performativity) the idea of sovereign self
stubbornly persists in everyday discourse. One of the
tasks of persona studies must be to examine these
common notions of self and authenticity. On one level,
most people experience the “self” as something that
refers to what we might call a singular sense of being,
and speak about when the feel “most like themselves.”
For some, the self emerges within the private realm, the
“backstage” areas to use Goffman’s terminology (3).
Others speak of feeling most like themselves in executing
a social role or some kind of professional occupation. For
example, take this extract from a contemporary
self-growth web site:

Are you feeling like you don’t know who you are anymore?
Or maybe you feel like you never really knew yourself. Perhaps you’ve gone through most of your life living by other people’s agendas or ideas of who you should be, and are just now realizing that you really don’t know yourself, your dreams, or your purpose. (Ewing 2013)

From the Platonic exhortation to “know thyself” through to the advice dispensed by self-help gurus, the self emerges as a persistent, if elusive, trope in scholarly and everyday discourse. Persona studies needs to reckon with the scope and breadth of the deployment of the self. Indeed it is the very ubiquity of terms like self, authenticity, and persona that require genealogical analysis in the Foucauldian sense of the term. This task entails looking for and uncovering the conditions of possibility for talking about the self across a wide range of contexts.

In summary, then, I contend that persona studies needs to carefully examine the relationship between various theories of self and the discourse of authenticity, and establish the extent to which Goffman’s apparently cynical account for the self challenges the assumed authenticity of the self in the Jungian paradigm. Of course, there are many other approaches one could take to this question. For example, Sartrean existentialism problematises any simple opposition between self and persona in its insistence that the self is the product of the others’ perceptions of the subject. This position is captured in his famous maxim that “hell is other people.” This is not because other people are inherently antagonistic or hostile, but that one’s sense of self is in the hands of others. Sartre dramatises this conundrum elegantly in his 1944 play, No Exit.

Sartre’s philosophy also engages with the discourse of authenticity, which it borrows from Heidegger’s Being and Time. Existentialism, in its many guises, dominated continental philosophy up until the 1960s and popularised the idea of “authenticity” as an ideal, which enables one to avoid the tyranny of the “They” and avoid the pitfalls of living in bad faith. There is a possibility that the nascent discipline of Persona Studies, as articulated by P. David Marshall and others, risks ignoring the crucial relationship between the discourse of authenticity and the presentation of self by concentrating on the “presentational self” as a set of pragmatic, tactical techniques designed to maximise the impact of impression management within a variety of social and professional contexts (Marshall “Persona”; Barbour and Marshall “Academic”). A more detailed and direct engagement with Foucault’s account of the emergence
and constitution of the modern subject, as well as with theories of performativity and authenticity that challenge the arguments and verities of Goffman, and Jung, can provide a richer account of how the concept of persona operates today with reference to, say, “the networked self” (Papacharissi; Barbour and Marshall).

So, I would like to conclude by returning to Dexter and the question of authenticity. Dexter can never really manage to identify his authentic self—his “gear-changing” core.

It’s there always, this Dark Passenger. And when he’s driving, I feel alive, half sick with the thrill of complete wrongness [...] lately there are these moments when I feel connected to something else... someone. It’s like the mask is slipping and things... people... who never mattered before are suddenly starting to matter. (Dexter, “An Inconvenient Lie”)

In this speech, he paradoxically identifies his “dark passenger” as the driver (Luckmann’s “gear-changer”) but then feels “the mask” slipping. There is something beyond what he assumed to be his dark core—the innermost aspect of being that makes executive decisions. Moreover, the status of Dexter’s “dark passenger” is unclear in this speech—is he “he self” or some external agent impelling Dexter to commit murder. Either way Dexter questions the motives and authenticity of this “dark passenger” and those of us with a stake in the nascent discipline of persona studies would do well to be equally skeptical about the status of our key terms.

References


“Dexter.” Dexter. Season 1, Episode 1. DVD Showtime,
2006.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Noncommercial - No Derivatives 3.0 License.