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M/C Journal, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2014) - 'persona'
Seriality and Persona

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No man [...] can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which one may be true. (Nathaniel Hawthorne *Scarlet Letter* – as seen and pondered by Tony Soprano at Bowdoin College, *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 5: "College")

The fictitious is a particular and varied source of insight into the everyday world. The idea of seriality—with its variations of the serial, series, seriated—is very much connected to our patterns of entertainment. In this essay, I want to begin the process of testing what values and meanings can be drawn from the idea of seriality into comprehending the play of persona in contemporary culture. From a brief overview of the intersection of persona and seriality as well as a review of the deployment of seriality in popular culture, the article focuses on the character/person-actor relationship to demonstrate how seriality produces persona. The French term for character—*personnage*—will be used to underline the clear relations between characterisation, person, and persona which have been developed by the recent work by Lenain and Wiame. *Personnage*, through its variation on the word person helps push the analysis into fully understanding the particular and integrated configuration between a public persona and the fictional role that an actor inhabits (Heinich).

There are several qualities related to persona that allow this movement from the fictional world to the everyday world to be profitable. Persona, in terms of origins, in and of itself implies performance and display. Jung, for instance, calls persona a mask where one is "acting a role" (167); while Goffman considers that performance and roles are at the centre of everyday life and everyday forms and patterns of communication. In recent work, I have use persona to describe how online culture pushes most people to construct a public identity that resembles what celebrities have had to construct for their livelihood for at least the last century ("Persona"; "Self"). My
work has expanded to an investigation of how online persona relates to individual agency ("Agency") and professional postures and positioning (Barbour and Marshall).

The fictive constructions then are intensified versions of what persona is addressing: the fabrication of a role for particular directions and ends. Characters or *personnages* are constructed personas for very directed ends. Their limitation to the study of persona as a dimension of public culture is that they are not real; however, when one thinks of the actor who takes on this fictive identity, there is clearly a relationship between the real personality and that of the character. Moreover, as Nayar’s analysis of highly famous characters that are fictitious reveals, these celebrated characters, such as *Harry Potter* or Wolverine, sometime take on a public presence in and of themselves. To capture this public movement of a fictional character, Nayar blends the terms celebrity with fiction and calls these semi-public/semi-real entities “celefiction”: the characters are famous, highly visible, and move across media, information, and cultural platforms with ease and speed (18-20). Their celebrity status underlines their power to move outside of their primary text into public discourse and through public spaces—an extra-textual movement which fundamentally defines what a celebrity embodies.

Seriality has to be seen as fundamental to a *personnage*’s power of and extension into the public world. For instance with Harry Potter again, at least some of his recognition is dependent on the linking or seriating the related books and movies. Seriality helps organise our sense of affective connection to our popular culture. The familiarity of some element of repetition is both comforting for audiences and provides at least a sense of guarantee or warranty that they will enjoy the future text as much as they enjoyed the past related text. Seriality, though, also produces a myriad of other effects and affects which provides a useful background to understand its utility in both the understanding of character and its value in investigating contemporary public persona.

Etymologically, the words "series" and seriality are from the Latin and refer to “succession” in classical usage and are identified with ancestry and the patterns of identification and linking descendants (Oxford English Dictionary). The original use of the seriality highlights its value in understanding the formation of the constitution of person and persona and how the past and ancestry connect in series to the current or contemporary self. Its current usage, however, has broadened metaphorically outwards to identify anything that is in sequence or linked or joined: it can be a series of lectures and arguments or a related mark of cars manufactured in a manner that are stylistically linked. It has since been deployed to capture the production process of various cultural forms and one of the key origins of this usage came from the 19th century novel.

There are many examples where the 19th century novel was sold and presented in serial form that are too numerous to even summarise here. It is useful to use Dickens’ serial production as a defining example of how seriality moved into popular culture and the entertainment industry more broadly. Part of the reason for the sheer length of many of Charles Dickens’ works related to their original distribution as serials. In fact, all his novels were first distributed in chapters in monthly form in magazines or newspapers. A number of related consequences from Dickens’ serialisation are relevant to understanding seriality in entertainment culture more widely (Hayward). First, his novel serialisation established a continuous connection to his readers over years. Thus Dickens’ name itself became synonymous and connected to an international reading public. Second, his use of seriality established a production form that was seen to be more affordable to its audience: seriality has to be understood as a form that is closely connected to economies and markets as cultural commodities kneaded their way into the structure of everyday life. And third, seriality established through repetition not only the author’s name but also the name of the key characters that populated the cultural form. Although not wholly attributable to the serial nature of the delivery, the characters such as Oliver Twist, Ebenezer Scrooge or David Copperfield along with a host of other major and minor players in his many books become integrated into everyday discourse because of their ever-presence and delayed delivery over

stories over time (see Allen 78-79). In the same way that newspapers became part of the vernacular of contemporary culture, fictional characters from novels lived for years at a time in the consciousness of this large reading public. The characters or *personnages* themselves became personalities that through usage became a way of describing other behaviours. One can think of *Uriah Heep* and his sheer obsequiousness in *David Copperfield* as a character-type that became part of popular culture thinking and expressing a clear negative sentiment about a personality trait.

In the twentieth century, serials became associated much more with book series. One of the more successful serial genres was the murder mystery. It developed what could be described as recognisable *personnages* that were both fictional and real. Thus, the real Agatha Christie with her consistent and prodigious production of short who-dunnit novels was linked to her Belgian fictional detective *Hercule Poirot*. Variations of these serial constructions occurred in children’s fiction, the emerging science fiction genre, and westerns with authors and characters rising to related prominence.

In a similar vein, early to mid-twentieth century film produced the film serial. In its production and exhibition, the film serial was a déclassé genre in its overt emphasis on the economic quality of seriality. Thus, the *film serial* was generally a filler genre that was interspersed before and after a feature film in screenings (Dixon). As well as producing a familiarity with characters such as *Flash Gordon*, it was also instrumental in producing actors with a public profile that grew from this repetition. Flash Gordon was not just a character; he was also the actor Buster Crabbe and, over time, the association became indissoluble for audiences and actor alike. Feature film serials also developed in the first half-century of American cinema in particular with child actors like Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland often reprising variations of their previous roles.

Seriality more or less became the standard form of delivery of broadcast media for most of the last 70 years and this was driven by the economies of production it developed. Whether the production was news, comedy, or drama, most radio and television forms were and are variation of serials. As well as being the zenith of seriality, television serials have been the most studied form of seriality of all cultural forms and are thus the greatest source of research into what serials actually produced. The classic serial that began on radio and migrated to television was the soap opera. Although most of the long-running soap operas have now disappeared, many have endured for more than 30 years with the American series *The Guiding Light* lasting 72 years and the British soap *Coronation Street* now in its 64th year. Australian nighttime soap operas have managed a similar longevity: *Neighbours* is in its 30th year, while *Home and Away* is in its 27th year. Much of the analyses of soap operas and serials deals with the narrative and the potential long narrative arcs related to characters and storylines. In contrast to most evening television serials historically, soap operas maintain the continuity from one episode to the next in an unbroken continuity narrative. Evening television serials, such as situation comedies, while maintaining long arcs over their run are episodic in nature: the structure of the story is generally concluded in the given episode with at least partial closure in a manner that is never engaged with in the never-ending soap opera serials.

Although there are other cultural forms that deploy seriality in their structures—one can think of comic books and manga as two obvious other connected and highly visible serial sources—online and video games represent the other key media platform of serials in contemporary culture. Once again, a “horizon of expectation” (Jauss and De Man 23) motivates the iteration of new versions of games by the industry. New versions of games are designed to build on gamer loyalties while augmenting the quality and possibilities of the particular game. Game culture and gamers have a different structural relationship to serials which at least Denson and Jahn-Sudmann describe as digital seriality: a new version of a game is also imagined to be technologically more sophisticated in its production values and this transformation of the similitude of game structure with innovation drives the economy of what are often described as
“franchises.” New versions of Minecraft as online upgrades or Call of Duty launches draw the literal reinvestment of the gamer. New consoles provide a further push to serialisation of games as they accentuate some transformed quality in gameplay, interaction, or quality of animated graphics. Sports franchises are perhaps the most serialised form of game: to replicate new professional seasons in each major sport, the sports game transforms with a new coterie of players each year.

From these various venues, one can see the centrality of seriality in cultural forms. There is no question that one of the dimensions of seriality that transcends these cultural forms is its coordination and intersection with the development of the industrialisation of culture and this understanding of the economic motivation behind series has been explored from some of the earliest analyses of seriality (see Hagedorn; Browne). Also, seriality has been mined extensively in terms of its production of the pleasure of repetition and transformation. The exploration of the popular, whether in studies of readers of romance fiction (Radway), or fans of science fiction television (Tulloch and Jenkins; Jenkins), serials have provided the resource for the exploration of the power of the audience to connect, engage and reconstruct texts.

The analysis of the serialisation of character—the production of a public personnage—and its relation to persona surprisingly has been understudied. While certain writers have remarked on the longevity of a certain character, such as Vicky Lord’s 40 year character on the soap opera One Life to Live, and the interesting capacity to maintain both complicated and hidden storylines (de Kosnik), and fan audience studies have looked at the parasocial-familiar relationship that fan and character construct, less has been developed about the relationship of the serial character, the actor and a form of twinned public identity. Seriality does produce a patterning of personnage, a structure of familiarity for the audience, but also a structure of performance for the actor. For instance, in a longitudinal analysis of the character of Fu Manchu, Mayer is able to discern how a patterning of iconic form shapes, replicates, and reiterates the look of Fu Manchu across decades of films (Mayer). Similarly, there has been a certain work on the “taxonomy of character” where the serial character of a television program is analysed in terms of 6 parts: physical traits/appearance; speech patterns, psychological traits/habitual behaviours; interaction with other characters; environment; biography (Pearson quoted in Lotz).

From seriality what emerges is a particular kind of “type-casting” where the actor becomes wedded to the specific iteration of the taxonomy of performance. As with other elements related to seriality, serial character performance is also closely aligned to the economic. Previously I have described this economic patterning of performance the “John Wayne Syndrome.” Wayne’s career developed into a form of serial performance where the individual born as Marion Morrison becomes structured into a cultural and economic category that determines the next film role. The economic weight of type also constructs the limits and range of the actor. Type or typage as a form of casting has always been an element of film and theatrical performance; but it is the seriality of performance—the actual construction of a personnage that flows between the fictional and real person—that allows an actor to claim a persona that can be exchanged within the industry. Even 15 years after his death, Wayne remained one of the most popular performers in the United States, his status unrivalled in its close definition of American value that became wedded with a conservative masculinity and politics (Wills).

Type and typecasting have an interesting relationship to seriality. From Eisenstein’s original use of the term typage, where the character is chosen to fit into the meaning of the film and the image was placed into its sequence to make that meaning, it generally describes the circumscribing of the actor into their look. As Wojcik’s analysis reveals, typecasting in various periods of theatre and film acting has been seen as something to be fought for by actors (in the 1850s) and actively resisted in Hollywood in 1950 by the Screen Actors Guild in support of more range of roles for each actor. It is also seen as something that leads to cultural stereotypes that can reinforce the
racial profiling that has haunted diverse cultures and the dangers of law enforcement for centuries (Wojcik 169-71). Early writers in the study of film acting, emphasised that its difference from theatre was that in film the actor and character converged in terms of connected reality and a physicality: the film actor was less a mask and more a sense of “being”(Kracauer). Cavell’s work suggested film over stage performance allowed an individuality over type to emerge (34). Thompson’s semiotic “commutation” test was another way of assessing the power of the individual “star” actor to be seen as elemental to the construction and meaning of the film role Television produced with regularity character-actors where performance and identity became indissoluble partly because of the sheer repetition and the massive visibility of these seriated performances.

One of the most typecast individuals in television history was Leonard Nimoy as Spock in Star Trek: although the original Star Trek series ran for only three seasons, the physical caricature of Spock in the series as a half-Vulcan and half-human made it difficult for the actor Nimoy to exit the role (Laws). Indeed, his famous autobiography riffed on this mis-identity with the forceful but still economically powerful title I am Not Spock in 1975. When Nimoy perceived that his fans thought that he was unhappy in his role as Spock, he published a further tome—I Am Spock—that righted his relationship to his fictional identity and its continued source of roles for the previous 30 years. Although it is usually perceived as quite different in its constitution of a public identity, a very similar structure of persona developed around the American CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite. With his status as anchor confirmed in its power and centrality to American culture in his desk reportage of the assassination and death of President Kennedy in November 1963, Cronkite went on to inhabit a persona as the most trusted man in the United States by the sheer gravitas of hosting the Evening News stripped across every weeknight at 6:30pm for the next 19 years. In contrast to Nimoy, Cronkite became Cronkite the television news anchor, where persona, actor, and professional identity merged—at least in terms of almost all forms of the man’s visibility.

From this vantage point of understanding the seriality of character/personnage and how it informs the idea of the actor, I want to provide a longer conclusion about how seriality informs the concept of persona in the contemporary moment. First of all, what this study reveals is the way in which the production of identity is overlaid onto any conception of identity itself. If we can understand persona not in any negative formulation, but rather as a form of productive performance of a public self, then it becomes very useful to see that these very visible public blendings of performance and the actor-self can make sense more generally as to how the public self is produced and constituted. My final and concluding examples will try and elucidate this insight further.

In 2013, Netflix launched into the production of original drama with its release of House of Cards. The series itself was remarkable for a number of reasons. First among them, it was positioned as a quality series and clearly connected to the lineage of recent American subscription television programs such as The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, Dexter, Madmen, The Wire, Deadwood, and True Blood among a few others. House of Cards was an Americanised version of a celebrated British mini-series. In the American version, an ambitious party whip, Frank Underwood, manoeuvres with ruthlessness and the calculating support of his wife closer to the presidency and the heart and soul of American power. How the series expressed quality was at least partially in its choice of actors. The role of Frank Underwood was played by the respected film actor Kevin Spacey. His wife, Clare, was played by the equally high profile Robin Warren. Quality was also expressed through the connection of the audience of viewers to an anti-hero: a personnage that was not filled with virtue but moved with Machiavellian acuity towards his objective of ultimate power. This idea of quality emerged in many ways from the successful construction of the character of Tony Soprano by James Gandolfini in the acclaimed HBO television series The Sopranos that reconstructed the very conception of the family in organised crime. Tony Soprano was enacted as complex and conflicted with a sense of right and justice, but embedded in the personnage were psychological tropes and scars, and an understanding of the need for violence to maintain influence power and a perverse but natural sense of order (Martin).
The new television serial character now embodied a larger code and coterie of acting: from *The Sopranos*, there is the underlying sense and sensibility of method acting (see Vineberg; Stanislavski). Gandolfini inhabited the role of Tony Soprano and used the inner and hidden drives and motivations to become the source for the display of the character. Likewise, Spacey inhabits Frank Underwood. In that new habitus of television character, the actor becomes subsumed by the role. Gandolfini becomes both over-determined by the role and his own identity as an actor becomes melded to the role. Kevin Spacey, despite his longer and highly visible history as a film actor is overwhelmed by the televisual role of Frank Underwood. Its serial power, where audiences connect for hours and hours, where the actor commits to weeks and weeks of shoots, and years and years of being the character—a serious character with emotional depth, with psychological motivation that rivals the most visceral of film roles—transforms the actor into a blended public person and the related *personnage*.

This blend of fictional and public life is complex as much for the producing actor as it is for the audience that makes the habitus real. What Kevin Spacey/Frank Underwood inhabit is a blended persona, whose power is dependent on the constructed identity that is at source the actor’s production as much as any institutional form or any writer or director connected to making *House of Cards* “real.” There is no question that this serial public identity will be difficult for Kevin Spacey to disentangle when the series ends; in many ways it will be an elemental part of his continuing public identity. This is the economic power and risk of seriality.

One can see similar blendings in the persona in popular music and its own form of contemporary seriality in performance. For example, Eminem is a stage name for a person sometimes called Marshall Mathers; but Eminem takes this a step further and produces beyond a character in its integration of the personal—a real *personnage*, Slim Shady, to inhabit his music and its stories. To further complexify this construction, Eminem relies on the production of his stories with elements that appear to be from his everyday life (Dawkins). His characterisations because of the emotional depth he inhabits through his rapped stories betray a connection to his own psychological state. Following in the history of popular music performance where the singer-songwriter’s work is seen by all to present a version of the public self that is closer emotionally to the private self, we once again see how the seriality of performance begins to produce a blended public persona. Rap music has inherited this seriality of produced identity from twentieth century icons of the singer/songwriter and its display of the public/private self—in reverse order from grunge to punk, from folk to blues.

Finally, it is worthwhile to think of online culture in similar ways in the production of public personas. Seriality is elemental to online culture. Social media encourage the production of public identities through forms of repetition of that identity. In order to establish a public profile, social media users establish an identity with some consistency over time. The everydayness in the production of the public self online thus resembles the production and performance of seriality in fiction. Professional social media sites such as LinkedIn encourage the consistency of public identity and this is very important in understanding the new versions of the public self that are deployed in contemporary culture. However, much like the new psychological depth that is part of the meaning of serial characters such as Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*, Slim Shady in Eminem, or Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*, social media seriality also encourages greater revelations of the private self via Instagram and Facebook walls and images. We are collectively reconstituted as personas online, seriated by the continuing presence of our online sites and regularly drawn to reveal more and greater depths of our character. In other words, the online persona resembles the new depth of the quality television serial *personnage* with elaborate arcs and great complexity. Seriality in our public identity is also uncovered in the production of our game avatars where, in order to develop trust and connection to friends in online settings, we maintain our identity and our patterns of gameplay. At the core of this online identity is a desire for visibility, and we are drawn to be “picked up” and shared in some repeatable form across what we each perceive as a meaningful dimension of culture. Through the circulation of viral images, texts, and videos we engage in a circulation and repetition of meaning that
feeds back into the constancy and value of an online identity. Through memes we replicate and seriate content that at some level seriates personas in terms of humour, connection and value.

Seriality is central to understanding the formation of our masks of public identity and is at least one valuable analytical way to understand the development of the contemporary persona. This essay represents the first foray in thinking through the relationship between seriality and persona.

References


