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

Persona to Persona Studies

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Sometimes a particular concept—a simple term—is the spark to a series of ideas. It might be ostentatious and perhaps hubristic that the editors of an issue on persona might imagine that their choice of the term persona has provided this intellectual spark. Fully aware of that risk, we want to announce that it has. The response to the call for papers related to persona was our first sign that something special was being initiated. The sheer number and interdisciplinary breadth of the abstracts and ultimate submissions was evidence that the term 'persona' was the catalyst to an explosion of ideas. As the responses flowed into the journal and to us, we became aware of the meme-like qualities of the many interpretations and history of the term, each with its own idiosyncratic coding of patterned similarity.

The reality of this development is that it was not entirely unexpected. The editors have been developing the concept of persona and persona studies over the past four years, and persona studies has emerged from a congruence in our collective research interests as an interdisciplinary investigation of the presentation of the self in the contemporary moment. Together, we have been involved in the development of the Persona Celebrity Publics Research Group (PCP) at Deakin University. Within that group, we have concentrated ourselves in the Persona Research cluster, made up of a group of 15 or so academics along with another smaller group from other institutions. Emerging from our work is the forthcoming book entitled *Persona Studies: Celebrity, Identity, and the Transformation of Public Culture* (forthcoming Wiley 2015). Both the book and the research group are intent on exploring what has been altering in our worlds, our cultures, and our communities that make us think the new intensified play of the personal in public needs closer scrutiny. The impetus for us as a team of scholars is quite clearly linked to the uses of online culture and how greater aspects of our lives are now involved in public displays, mediated displays, and a peculiar new blend of interpersonal and presentational constructions of identities and selves.

Persona as a specific area of inquiry has emerged from the close study of the public self. Its immediate intellectual past has its strongest links with research on celebrity. In the *Celebrity Studies Reader* collection, Marshall began forming the idea that a new public self was emerging through new media (*New Media*). In subsequent work, Marshall identifies celebrity culture as one of the pedagogic sources for how the wider population presented itself in online culture and social media (Marshall, *Promotion*). Barbour and Marshall expanded their thinking about the presentation of the self through a closer study of online academic persona and the different strategic ways individuals were managing and building reputations and prestige through these techniques. Terms such as the 'comprehensive,' 'networked,' and 'uncontained' self, mapped the various kinds of public personalities that were emerging through the most prominent academics (Barbour and Marshall).

In a similar vein, Barbour's research has looked closely at the online and public personas that fringe artists—specifically tattoo artists, craftivists, performance poets and street artists—produce and maintain in the contemporary moment (*Hiding; Finding*). Her work has advanced the concepts of "registers of performance" (*Registers*), where a closer analysis of how the personal, the professional, and

sometimes the intimate registers are constructed and deployed to produce a public persona that demonstrates 'artistness'. By analysing persona through registers of performance, Barbour is able to differentiate between the types of identity building activity that occurs online. This provides insight into the ways that impression management occurs in spaces that suffer from context collapse due to the intersection of friends, family, fans, and followers.

Moore's work (*Hats; Magic; Invigorating*) on the player's assembly of a networked online 'gamer' persona considers the intersection of social media and video game culture and contributes analysis of the affective dimensions of player-oriented game objects and their public curation and display. His recent research visualising Twitter and Flickr data (*Screenshots*, forthcoming) advances an understanding of the accumulation and online presentation of the self through digital game artefacts, specifically video game screenshots. He is currently researching the interaction of social media activity, reputation management, and everyday identity 'play' within public game cultures and the larger dynamics of production and consumption of games and play in the video game industry.

Most recently, Marshall called for what he titled a "persona studies manifesto": the public presentation of the self demands a more extensive analysis of the play and deployment of persona in contemporary culture. Beyond popular culture, the development of reputation and persona and its intersection with online culture especially needs to be explored in those professions, disciplines and activities where this form of investigation has never been attempted (Marshall, *Persona Studies*). The initiative of persona studies then is in some ways turning the cultural studies' approach to the study of the audience on its head: it is a study of agency and the processes by which agency has been individualized and assembled across contemporary culture, but highly privileged in online culture (Marshall, *Personifying*). Persona studies involves a close investigation of the personalized and negotiated presentation of the self.

So, what is persona? The articles here assume different, but connected, understandings of the term, each with levels of deference to writers such as Jung, Goffman, Butler, and Foucault, along with some expected allusions to the ancient Greeks and Romans who coined the term. The Greek origins identify that persona is a mask and derived from performance and acting. From Hannah Arendt's reading of the Greeks this mask of public identity was not seen in a derogatory way; rather it was natural to assume a public/political persona that was quite removed from the private and home sphere. A political persona defined by citizenry was a clearly conscious separation from the household of activity. Jung's take on persona is that it was designed for collective experience and for the outside world and therapy would lead to an understanding of the individual that delved beneath the persona. The resurgence in interest in Goffman's dramaturgical analogy allows us to consider persona as an everyday performance, where the purpose of the presentation of self is to convince the audience (and at times, the performer) that the performance is genuine and authentic.

All of us know what it is like to act in a role, to wear a uniform or costume, to create a profile. More than a few of us know what it is to suffer through the 'individualising' categories of a social networking sign-up survey that do not adequately account for distinctions. Persona is all these things, or rather, through the various everyday activities of our work, social, and online selves we contribute to the accretion of the identity at the base of its structure. Persona functions like the construct or automated script that we assemble to interact with the world with on our behalf. This involves the technologies of computation and mediation and their interfaces that function to automate, produce and filter communication with us; email, blogs, Twitter accounts, and so on. These golems interconnect and can interact on their own in unpredictable ways on our behalf; connecting our Facebook account to a product, brand or petition; using Google as a portal to login into other web enabled services; or authorising an app to record our location. Then there are the traces that we leave scattered across digital networks, intranets, hard drives, and lost USB memory sticks, from scattered collections of digital photos to the contact lists of our mobile devices and the 'achievements' in our online gaming profiles. Persona can also be something

that happens to us, as friends tag unflattering images via Facebook, or another Twitter user publicly addresses us with a unwanted, or unwarranted commentary, using the '@' and the '#' functions.

We have an extensive degree of control over the ways we assemble ourselves online and yet the contemporary experience is one of constant negotiation with forces that seeks to disavow their responsibilities to us, and maximise the limitations under which we can act. Our personas serve as a buffer to these forces. We can strategically assemble our persona to participate in, influence and use to our advantage to transmit messages across the network and communicate a mediated form of ourselves. The many ways to account persona stands as a primary and apparently Sisyphean task for persona studies: no sooner than when we might assemble a complete topology of the many accounts, traditions, domains, methodologies and theories for account of for the self, we will have arrived at possibly entirely new way of conceptualising the presentation of online persona through some post-Facebook, Oculus Rift, or Google Glass augmented reality experience.

One of the challenges of persona studies will be to provide a series of methodological and theoretical tools, as well as a common touchstone from which multiple perspectives may converge around the meme-like qualities of this dramatic term. It will be necessary to consider the future of the presentation of the self, as much as the past accounts for the understanding of the self and its compositions. In the contemporary moment we consider a series of common currents and features of the iterations of persona with which we might begin this endeavour. The collective objective of the 'persona' theme edition is to coalesce around the emerging significance of the public self, and to map that activity within disciplinary traditions, historical precedents and the cultural and technological predispositions that have made this kind of reading of the contemporary world valuable, important, and ultimately, sensible.

This collection of articles on persona is innovative in terms of the diversity of issues it tackles through the term. Given the massive change in public identity that we have identified as an elemental part of online culture, it is not surprising that social media and online constructions of persona figure prominently throughout the issue. However, we are also pleased to include papers that consider fictional performances from both television and film and even character studies of public figures. Marshall's feature article for the edition continues his theorisation of persona. Seriality is identified as one of the ways that a consistency of persona is developed and the article charts the usefulness in analogizing how the construction of a serial character or 'personnage' for an actor/performer provides insights into the relationship between the person and persona in other settings that are emerging in the contemporary moment.

In 'Darkly Dreaming (in) Authenticity: The Self/Persona Opposition in Dexter,' Glenn D'Cruz uses Dexter Morgan, the novelised serial killer and Showtime TV anti-hero to examine the connections between self and persona and the discourse of authenticity. D'Cruz foresees a series of challenges for persona studies and considers key concerns ahead, in terms of the critical vocabulary and scholarly agenda and addresses the need for critical genealogy of the term 'persona'. Talia Morag, in 'Persons and Their Personas: Living with Yourself', considers the tensions identified in the persona of the private domain, and examines the patterns of social interaction that work to affect an 'endorsed' private persona, compared to those patterns classified as 'hidden'. She frames the negotiation of these tensions as a move to better understand the sphere of the private self, as well as the those strains which arise on the private persona and the grounds from which they come to occupy our time.

Together these two approaches predict the convergence of the private, the performed and the public persona which occupies Neil Henderson's 'The Contingency of Online Persona and Its Tension with Relationship Development'. Henderson's engagement with the dimensions of online persona in the short film, *Noah*, takes a position at the crossroads between Marshall's celebrity-inscribed approach

to persona studies and the application of actor-network theory in order to map the potential pitfalls of identity management through ubiquitous technologies and broader critical questions about the play of our online selves in the everyday.

Moving to the multi-user virtual environment of *Second Life*, Lesley Procter draws on the symbolic interactionist theories of social identity and the role of the avatar in 'A Mirror without a Tain: Personae, Avatars, and Selves in a Multi-User Virtual Environment'. Procter's contribution to persona studies highlights the actual and conceptual mirroring involved in the sense of the self involved in the interaction with others online. Taina Bucher's 'About a Bot: Hoax, Fake, Performance Art' is a revealing examination of the Twitter bot phenomenon. Bucher's case study on 'bot fakeness' considers the automation and performance of persona and the interactions and relationships between people and bots.

Brady Robards, in 'Digital Traces of the Persona through Ten Years of Facebook', offers a critical reading of the Facebook 'look back' video creation application made to celebrate the social network's ten year. As with Bucher and Proctor, Robards is concerned with the ways persona is created through highly mediated social networking platforms, where the agency of the individual is countered by the intervention of the software itself. Robards considers in particular two functions of Facebook: first as a site for the performance of life narratives, and second as a location for reflection on public and private disclosure.

Taking a specific element of this idea of disclosure—the sharing of one's legal name—as a starting point, Ellen Moll's 'What's in a Nym?: Gender, Race, Pseudonymity, and the Imagining of the Online Persona' is a study of the reactions of feminist and anti-racist bloggers in the ongoing battles over pseudonymity online. Moll's contribution centres around current concerns with the 'real name policies' of social media and web-based platforms and services. What is at stake here in the negotiation between the individuals, technologies and institutions over the rights of self-determination and agency in the digital and online environments.

Narrowing the focus to a single case study, Emma Maguire's study of author website as a site of self-presentation in 'Home, About, Shop, Contact: Constructing an Authorial Persona via the Author Website' examines the authorial persona produced for consumption within literary markets. Framing of the authorial website as 'automedial text', rather than as direct representations of a pre-existing self, Maguire employs authorship theory to understand the website as a genre of persona performance and textuality.

Shifting away from the focus on social media, this issue concludes with a trio of character studies, each of which involves a detailed and critical account of the dimensions of a public assembly of a persona. Nathan Farrell's 'From Activist to Entrepreneur: Peace One Day and the Changing Persona of the Social Campaigner' is the first, and considers the ways that an individual manages his persona for different audiences. Farrell's focus is Jeremy Gilley, a documentary filmmaker and peace campaigner, and the paper speaks to the dimensions of overlapping audiences connected to an articulation of a socially aware entrepreneurial persona.

Sally Totman and Mat Hardy have a very different figure in their contribution as they examine the many different public personas of Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. In 'The Many Personas of Colonel Qaddafi', Totman and Hardy interrogate the multiple aspects of Qaddafi's construction as a brotherly revolutionary, philosopher, liberator, leader, and clown. The authors chart the progression of his often conflicted and chaotic legacy, and of this political, ideological and even messianic presentation of the self to the Western and Arab worlds.

Anastasia Denisova, completes the triptych of persona case studies for this collection, with 'How Vladimir Putin's Divorce Story Was

Constructed and Received, or When the President Divorced His Wife and Married the Country Instead'. Denisova contends Vladimir Putin's divorce is representative of the degree to which political and private persona are mediated and merged across often competing channels of communication. The analysis contends with online discourse, images, and texts, which reveal the extensive personification of politics in Putin's public persona in an environment of reception by an audience which also consider the values and attributes of their own country as a national persona.

Conclusion

We have structured the narrative flow of articles in this issue on persona from the fictional through to the online transformations of the self and then even further into the analyses of the public and political dimensions that are part of the constitution of public selves. No doubt, you as a reader will see different connections and intersections and will play with what makes the idea of persona so meaningful and valuable in understanding the strategic construction of a public identity and so central to comprehending the contemporary moment. We invite you to engage with this further with the issue editors' planned 2015 launch of a journal called *Persona Studies*. Until then, this issue of *M/C Journal* certainly represents the most comprehensive and, we think, interesting, collection of writing on persona as we explore the implications behind the mask of public identity. We hope the issue stimulates discussion and with that hope, we hope to hear from you.

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