

“DOG BOY, MEDIA WHORE. IT’S WHO THE HELL YOU TAKE ME FOR”: BRIAN MOLKO’S CURATED MUSIC MAGAZINE PERSONA IN THE FAN ARCHIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how the persona enacted at the end of the 1990s by Brian Molko - British band Placebo's lead singer and guitarist - resonates with contemporary approaches of persona performance. Amplified by presentational media along the lines of Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, persona increasingly proliferates as enmeshed in everyday practices and identities. This is no different in the domain of (popular) music. Yet, contemporary music personas whose image approximates ordinariness rather than extravaganza do sometimes reject the connotation of artificiality attached to the term persona, resulting in a type of 'reluctant persona'.

Practicing a form of anecdotal theory (Gallop 2002), I tap into how I experienced Molko's persona through fan archives, and link his historical negotiation of an 'ordinary extraordinariness' with this present-day reluctant persona. A close re-reading of a selection of 1997-1999 music magazine articles in the Placebo Russia archive not only shows how Molko's music magazine persona curates identity markers of extraordinariness as ordinary, but also demonstrates how the media texts that go into a persona continually perform these anew. Through the lens of performance studies, online fan archives shed light on the intensified correlation between (new) media and music artists' engagement with performing the ordinary, subsequently entangling the discourses of theatricality and performativity.

KEY WORDS

Musical Persona; (Extra)ordinary Identity Performance; Brian Molko; Fan Archive, Presentational Media

INTRODUCTION

May 1997, London. In a concert review of a Brixton Academy show by the (at the time) booming British band Placebo, newspaper *The Independent* notes about lead singer and guitarist Brian Molko:

When he appears in a fetching black cocktail dress, smeary black eyeliner and Louise Brooks black bob, he is androgyny writ large. David Bowie circa 1974 is

in the foyer phoning his copyright lawyer. Is Brian a boy or girl? Perhaps more pertinently, is he real or is he fake? (Thornton 1997)

The preoccupation with Molko's realness or fakeness as a music performer is not only typical for this specific artist's identity performance, but characterizes the larger discourse surrounding the concept of persona in music. Regardless of the live concert setting—an environment that per definition prompts a certain degree of staging—the aura of authenticity remains the ultimate holy grail against which pop artists continue to be evaluated. The belief that a musician draws from a lived reality is deeply ingrained in our experience of popular music. Performance theorist Philip Auslander, who coined the theoretical notion of “musical persona” (Auslander 2006), formulated his theory of performing a musical identity by building on music sociologist Simon Frith's observation that popular music artists are believed to be “personally expressive” (Frith 1996, p.186), and more so than performers in other realms. This theory underscores the special position that the context of popular music provides for the broader field of persona studies, with Charles Fairchild and P. David Marshall suggesting that the persona concept's “mutability is no more prominently displayed than in its intersection and integration into music and musical culture” (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p.1).

Scholarship on music and persona in recent years undeniably reflects the intensification and proliferation of what persona studies identifies as its impetus, “the highly mediatized and screen-oriented contemporary and pervasive public persona” (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 7). Inherently interdisciplinary studies of music artists' performances on and off live stages have delivered a plenitude of critical research into what musicians perform besides music. Nonetheless, they often selectively focus on one aspect of performance, rather than establish the broader encompassing theoretical framework required for making sense of contemporary musical persona. This gap in the study of musicians' personas encouraged musicologist Kai Arne Hansen to develop a more systematic, transmedial approach to the pop persona (2019), transposing Auslander's fundamental ideas about the musical persona into our lived realities dominated by new media screens. These screens also allowed me in 2009, long before I became familiar with the flourishing field of persona studies, to familiarize myself with what I would later define in academic terms as the “musical persona” of Placebo front man Brian Molko. When I was fourteen (more than a decade after the aforementioned concert review appeared in *The Independent*), I downloaded footage of Placebo's unreleased song “Kitsch Object” from that 1997 concert onto my little magenta iPod. Night after night, way past my bedtime, I revelled in the mystery that Molko oozed, replaying how the silhouette of a short man in a tight black dress introduced the angry yet melancholic opening riff of a ‘brand spanking new’ song (Figure 1).

Even though I was fully aware of the fact that Molko's gender nonconforming appearance showcased an act set within the confines of the music scene, I was also convinced that the manner in which he presented himself was deeply rooted in a daily lived reality. The identity he conveyed as a musician seemed to grant me a glimpse of an alternative London way of life that I thought was interesting to model my own aspirations after, rather than just an identity apt for performance occasions such as concerts. Understanding my teenage involvement with Molko and his band Placebo as an early encounter with the intersection between persona, music, and performance theory, this paper explores the theoretical insights my anecdotal engagement with Molko affords in terms of the light that his specific antecedent casts upon the role of contemporary musical persona in an altering mediascape.

In what follows, I first elaborate on the expansion of everyday musical personas within a presentational media regime, and briefly sketch the similarities between present-day and pre-Internet popular music performers and their varying stances towards persona performance.

This introductory section sets the scene for my subsequent reading of Molko's 'Nancy Boy' era music magazine persona through the lens of the online fan archive; this reading is the result of



Figure 1. Screenshot from YouTube video *PLACEBO - Kitsch Object (1997 Brixton Academy)*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bR7TTbA8bFQ>>

having spent—as a fan myself—an enormous amount of time digging through online fan fora and archives. I approach Placebo's music magazine features as scraps through which I could participate in a past identity performance, re-initiating an ephemeral moment. This investigation into the online fan archive elucidates the musical persona as an ongoing collection of media texts, which in return informs the aesthetic of the ordinary for persona performance. In combination with my implied position as a former fan girl of the band, Molko's alignment of gender nonconformity with dimensions of the ordinary serves a unique perspective onto the curatorial tendencies of contemporary personas in popular music.

THE RELUCTANT PERSONA

Persona studies founders David Marshall, Kim Barbour, and Christopher Moore have pointed out how continued research into ordinary or everyday personas is required (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 213). Such a demand for continued investigation into the everydayness of persona performance ties in with sociologist Joshua Gamson's observation in the field of celebrity studies that the "ordinary" has been elevated to the core business of celebrity, likewise linking it with the emergence of the internet (2011, p. 1062). The importance of the ordinary or everyday persona, including through celebrity as a subset of persona, is evidently closely intertwined with the omnipresent demand to manage a strategic identity that social media have imposed, opening up to a wider audience the mechanisms of fame and self-performance previously reserved for extraordinary public figures. Ordinary-looking identities play an equally important role for personas in popular music, yet it is hard to deny that scholarly research displays a tendency to focus on popular music artists' grand gestures (see Auslander's 2006 book linking glam rock with theatricality, Stan Hawkins' collection on British dandies in music, the 2014 Routledge collection on Lady Gaga, Crosby & Lynn's 2017 chapter on Dolly Parton's authentic artifice, or *Popular Music and Society's* special issue on Beyoncé in 2019). While the

distinction between extraordinary and ordinary is fraught with subjectivity, research into music and persona remains for the largest part in favour of extraordinary and/or extravagant acts of identity performance. Aside from musicologist Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik's work on the ordinariness in Norwegian singer-songwriter Marit Larsen's persona (2017), I am not aware of any recent research on musical personas that explicitly gauges the meaning of the many identity performances in popular music that claim an aesthetic of ordinariness. In conjunction with personas approximating ordinary day-to-day appearances, one can also make note of a certain 'persona reluctance'. Against the general proliferation of persona performance, there are also artists who react reluctantly towards being identified as 'having a persona'. One particularly striking example is pop star Lana del Rey. Del Rey has expressed significant resistance towards being said to have a persona (Kornhaber 2019), even though music artists always, to some extent, carefully shape the way they present themselves; this is especially so in the case of the highly stylized Del Rey who recently exchanged her earlier Old Hollywood glamour for an ordinary 'American mom in the mall' look. She sits in stark contrast to the wide-ranging and extravagant identity manifestations of one of her contemporaries, Lady Gaga, who has distinguished her "true self" from her public persona (Begley 2016).

What primarily seems to complicate the notion of persona for popular music is the strategy of calculated self-presentation that at times seems to attest of an insincerity that clashes with common conceptions about authenticity in popular music. However, as argued by musicologist Allan Moore, the vexed notion of authenticity in music discourse, is equally constructed since it is a quality ascribed to a performance, rather than inscribed in it (2002, p. 210). Moore conceptualizes authenticity in (pop) music as authentication, either of a performer's unmediated inner expression (first person authenticity), the space for identification that it produces (second person authenticity), or the representation of an original tradition (third person authenticity) (2002, p. 211-220). Personas in music that maintain an ordinary appearance mainly deal with a combination of first- and second-person authenticity, which informs pop culture's fixation on 'realness' and artists' reluctance to equate a carefully shaped presentation of the self with a persona. An extravagant identity performance, contradictorily, appears to be easier to comprehend as an authentic artistic expression of the self, than a stylized appearance that is essentially indistinguishable from an ordinary everyday look.

While social media have undeniably augmented the ambiguous conceptualization of persona, the complexities at stake are as relevant for pre-Internet musical personas. Let's take the ultimate musical persona reference, David Bowie, whom both Gaga and Molko cite as an inspiration. Even though Bowie's persona gradually inclined towards a more ordinary appearance at the end of his career, devoid of previous layers of spectacle (Usher 2015; Culbert 2020), the common thread that runs through considerations of Bowie in terms of persona is that they tend to revolve around his theatrical manifestations as Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, or The Thin White Duke. These figures that Bowie introduced to the world were not entirely separate from David Robert Jones' lived reality: think, for example, of the genderplay that kickstarted the discussion around his bisexuality. However, I would rather identify these 'personas' that followed up on each other as characters, because they signal "a departure from the conventional" (Blair 2015, p. 167). The characters Bowie performed are more radically set apart from ordinary life than the way in which Molko—mentored by Bowie—appeared in front of an audience all those years later. I therefore focus in this text on Molko's provocative effeminate 'Nancy Boy' appearance, which roughly coincided with the first two Placebo albums. Since this debut period is characterized by the Bowie-esque practice of androgynous looks mixed with provocative media statements, first impressions of Molko might appear counterintuitive to arguing that his self-presentation differs from Bowie's. However, close

readings of Molko's music media discourse from that same timeframe reveal a clear distinction with Bowie.

One of the most concrete examples of the difference between Bowie's characters and Molko's persona is found in Molko's responses during a 1998 interview for *Interview* magazine, where the interviewer queries both the singer's background in drama, as well as the resemblance with Bowie. Molko answer says that "it is not an act, (...), it's real" and different from Bowie's approach as "it is not some sort of Ziggy-like attempt to create a character" (Stratton 1998). In other interview fragments, he expresses very similar sentiments: "But for me it's not a sort of Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, different character-per-concept album kind of vibe, it's very much who I am. I'm not about to cut all my hair off" (Morton 1997). Further illustrations can be found in what Molko had to say about the minor roles he and his bandmates play in Todd Haynes' thinly veiled Bowie/Iggy Pop glam rock biopic *Velvet Goldmine* from 1998. Molko separates the glam rock tradition that the movie emulates from his own identity performance within the band: "(...) there is a big difference between glamorous and glam. To me, glam is lager lads in make-up. We enjoy being glamorous, we enjoy dressing-up, and wearing make-up, but we're not any way in that glam tradition, on a musical or physical level really" (*Melody Maker* 24 October 1998, p.23). Molko's claims remind us of Del Rey's reluctant persona, which poses the question: what does it mean when Del Rey and Molko qualify as much as Gaga and Bowie as a 'musical persona': "a performed presence that is neither a fictional character nor equivalent to the performer's real identity" (Auslander 2006, p. 102)? Molko and Del Rey similarly clarify, each within their own context, the complications caused by integrating markers of 'ordinariness' into their musical persona. Our understanding of persona in the realm of popular music would therefore benefit from a recalibration of its relation to the ordinary, with social media having ordinariness located at the centre of our daily experiences of persona.

THE (FORMER) FANGIRL AS A RESEARCHER?

The gradual transition to social media as the main locus for persona performance is where the commingling of traditional representational and online presentational media in my fan experience of Molko proves exceptionally insightful. Revisiting the musical persona of my former teenage idol was inspired by his appearance in fashion designer Marc Jacobs' 2021 *Heaven* collection. In the campaign, he was seen alongside another 1990s icon, Kate Moss, sporting a recreation of the AC Acoustics STUNT GIRL tee-shirt that he regularly wore around 1997 (Figure 2 & 3). I found it curious that a rather banal piece of clothing that I assumed would solely resonate with a select club of (ex)fans, already familiar with specific 1997 imagery of Molko, was now charged with cult appeal. Compared to the dresses and make-up that made the singer stand out against the hypermasculine Britpop-crazed music scene at the time (and which eventually granted him the status of queer icon), the band tee-shirt itself passed as a quite conventional, even ordinary garment. The heyday of Molko's music magazine presence around the end of the nineties additionally coincides with the earliest social network sites (boyd and Ellison 2008, p. 214), which made me probe Molko as a precursor of persona in the social media era, where everyday style elements are becoming entrenched in persona practices.

My anecdotal involvement with the object of study requires some further methodological explanation. Although I have not conducted self-observation over a set amount of time as an auto-ethnographic approach would require, my theorizing demands a similar degree of recognition of how my analysis of Molko's persona folds in with the subjective experience of being a former fangirl of his band. Feminist literature scholar and theorist Jane Gallop's project of anecdotalizing theory proposes an entry point to draw from this kind of



Figure 2. Brian Molko by Harley Weir for Marc Jacob's *Heaven* collection, 2021.

Figure 3. Brian Molko by Pat Pope, 1997. Placebo Russia Archive.

anecdotal material. Instead of theorizing anecdotes, she deliberately theorizes “via relatively rare and marginal cases” (2002, p. 6) to overcome the hierarchy that situates abstract thought in a higher realm of theory and anecdotes as futile illustrations. The reversal of the marginalisation of the anecdote aligns with what has always been my main interest regarding performance, music, and persona: the excess of artistic practice, the non-essential ornamental details. Following how Gallop “recounts an anecdote in an attempt to ‘read’ that account for the theoretical insights it affords” (Gallop 2002, p. 2), I use the Stunt Girl shirt as a point of departure, holding a meaning beyond fan spheres, tying together the role of online fan archiving and dimensions of ordinariness within musical personas.

The cult appeal with which the Stunt Girl shirt seems to be charged, indicates how Molko's edgy, feminine dresses that confused Placebo's audiences exist on the same plane as some of his more ordinary appearances. Common-looking garments can contribute to persona building in a similar way as extravagant costumes (e.g. the Ziggy Stardust catsuit) or trademark hair and make-up (e.g. Robert Smith of The Cure's panda eyes) in the production of a persona universe. The musician identity of Molko thus arises out of a stylization of the day-to-day identity he continuously expressed and drew from, rather than from an alternate reality carefully crafted for performance occasions. His incorporation of what he claims to be more of an ordinary than extraordinary identity into an aestheticized performance persona echoes the role of persona in an era where digital tools for self-presentation are omnipresent. With their ubiquity in everyday activities, social media personas do not function as blank canvases onto which any imaginable identity can be projected, but usually stay closer to what is perceived as an ordinary identity expression. Nevertheless, the inherently highly stylized act of performing an (online) persona always concerns an ambivalent interplay of both the artificial and the authentic.

Molko's persona as produced in music magazines similarly reflects the ambivalence of anchoring self-presentation in an everyday identity instead of the mediated context that it inevitably stems from. Music media's framing of Molko and his band as out of the ordinary,

reflected in the 1998 *NME* cover headline “The Wicked, Wicked Ways of Placebo” (see Figure 4), is often incongruent with what they then actually get to report on. Another early career interview from February 1997 with Molko and Stefan Olsdal (the Swedish bassist and other core band member of Placebo) for the British music magazine *Q*, for example, does not really reflect the promise of the title “Out Come The Freaks”. Content-wise, it mainly reports on the musician’s upbringing and his quotidian life after sudden success, while an accompanying portrait of Molko and Olsdal gives the reader a glimpse of an unremarkable Queen’s Park West London flat. Whilst the interviewer initiates several detailed descriptions of Molko’s characteristic gender-defying appearance, he simultaneously describes how Molko counters the fabricated nature of his appearance:

He wears his hair in a Louise Brooks bob and likes a little make-up. Playing with gender has often been a bankable pop option. But Molko reckons *it’s just the way he likes to look*. [emphasis added] (...) Likewise, he is canny enough to recognize that fashion will always play a part in pop success. If there’s a gap, Molko will fill it. So, if the people are missing a band offering lyrical angst and barbed guitars he’s not going to turn them away, but he would *hate listeners to think there’s something fabricated* [emphasis added] about Placebo, some whiff of a marketing opportunity. Oddly, for somebody who enjoys role-playing, Molko emphasises *how natural everything is* [emphasis added]: the sound Placebo makes; the way they look; how they perform (Yates 1997).

Molko’s concern with communicating that he is his everyday self and not simply a product of the music industry can be read in tandem with the specific timeframe in which his early persona is situated. Drawing on his previous research into celebrity culture, P. David Marshall demonstrated that representational media regime’s merging with a new presentational media environment lies at the heart of the proliferation of persona (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020). Even though the peculiar persona of Molko chiefly predates social media, the end of the 1990s was definitely characterized by a gradually altering constellation of media regimes. The vague contours of presentational media already start to shimmer through the still predominantly representational media paradigm to which print media, such as music magazine *Q*, belonged. Media theorist Roy Shuker has usefully critiqued music magazines for catering to niche interests, stimulating an individualized consumption pattern, and functioning as purveyors of styles (Shuker 1994, p. 86). Compared to the traditional media of television and radio, music magazines, in his view, functioned more as a repertory from which one could learn and absorb lifestyles in their broadest sense. Although still far removed from the ways in which social media is “performed and produced by the individual” (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 49), Shuker’s depiction of music magazines invokes certain sensibilities of the presentational mode. Curiously, all of the characteristics that Shuker attributes to music magazines, are even more accurate for the fan archive of Placebo Russia which provided 14-year-old me (who did not consume *New Musical Express*, *Q*, or even Placebo’s fanclub magazine *Silver Rocket* (Figure 5) at the time of their original publication) with fan material to grasp Molko’s persona.

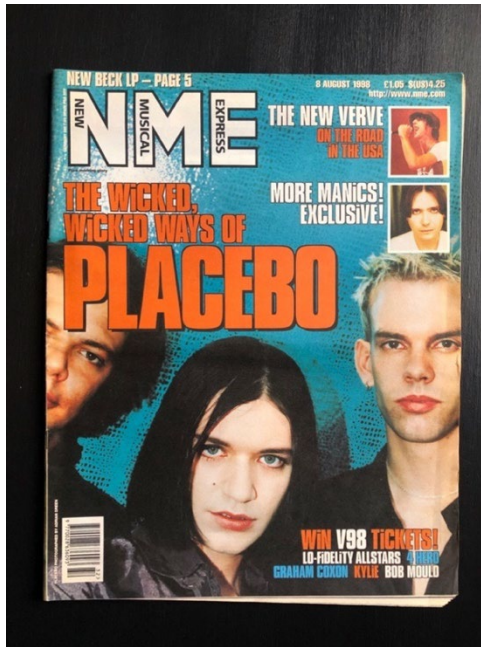


Figure 4. Cover of *New Musical Express* 8 August 1998.

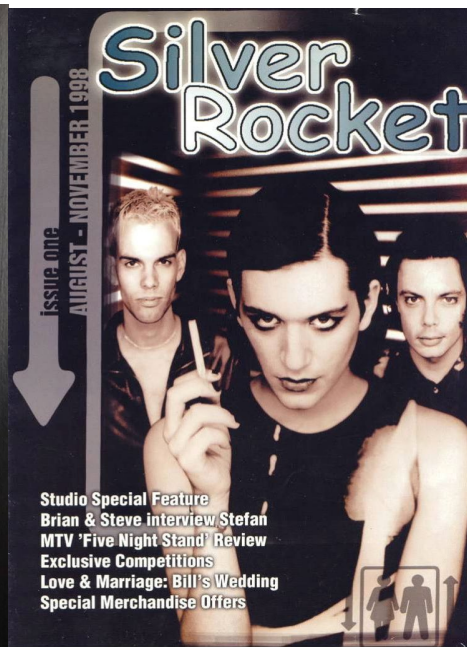


Figure 5. Cover of *Silver Rocket* fan magazine August – November 1998. Placebo Russia Archive

PERSONA AS A COMPLEX AMALGAM OF ARCHIVED MEDIA TEXTS

To further unlock what Molko's figure suggests for the ordinary in music persona, I turn towards online fan archives that stored Placebo's music media artefacts. These fan archives were crucial to how the teenage version of myself pieced together the identity that early Molko carried out. One of the online spaces I visited to learn about Molko was the Placebo Russia Archive (Figure 6). I carefully collected every scanned or typed up article, quote or photo, and basked in the delight of scraping up the most banal elements that could add to the impression I was assembling of Molko. Even today, the Placebo Russia Archive conserves the band's media output that, in Placebo's early years, mainly consisted of print interviews and photoshoots. By bringing legacy media texts into the digital world, this type of online archive evinces an intermediate stage of "traditional media images, advertising, photographs, or quotes, that are now blended with (...) the panoply of digital objects" (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 49). My familiarization with early Molko through the fan archive does not match the original appearance through legacy media formats, but neither does it entirely correspond to the present-day content of social media. The hybridity of what fan archives disseminate assists in breaking down musical personas' interactions with the ordinary.

Online archives are most often associated with the specific practice of fanfiction, which is also what performance and new media theorist Abigail De Kosnik takes as the focal point for her evaluation of digital archiving practices in media fandoms. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan's concept of the global theatre (De Kosnik 2016, p. 609), De Kosnik first and foremost invites us to conceive of online content as performance. She foregrounds the notion of repertoire as embodied repetition, emphasizing how online archives rely more on human performance in relation to the archive material than is conventionally understood (De Kosnik 2016, p. 30). Digital archival platforms are a matter of continued maintenance, to the same extent as actual physical archives, requiring repeated human actions in order to keep from stagnating or ceasing to exist. If no one paid for the domain of placeborussia.ru, I would no longer be able to revisit

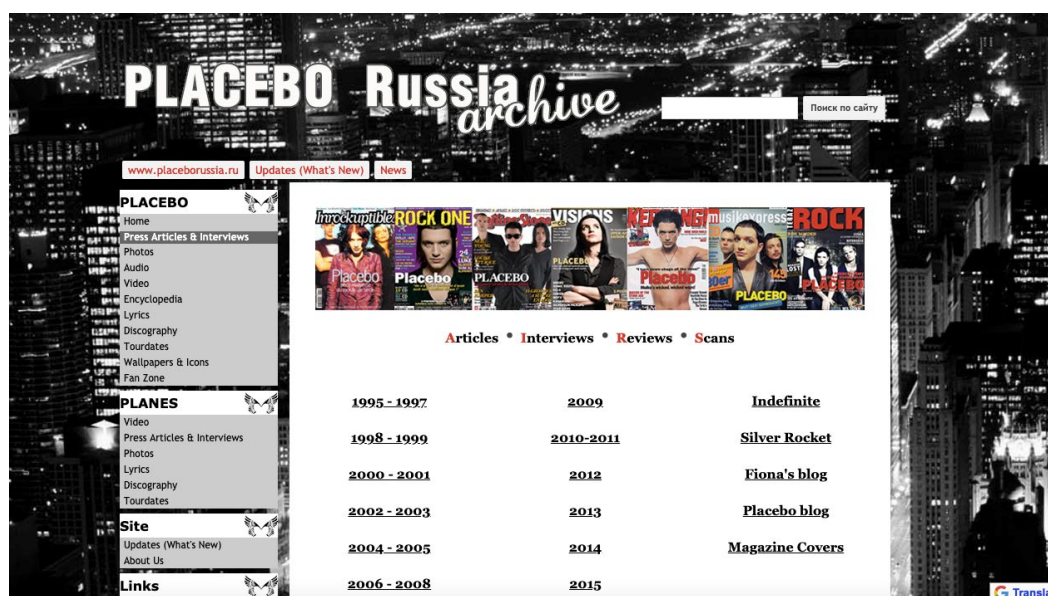


Figure 6. Screenshot of the Placebo Russia Archive, June 2021,
<<http://www.placeborussia.ru/press>>

the catalogue of music magazine excerpts and photographs whose communal fan processing I participated in twelve years before writing this article.

De Kosnik's interests are mainly pointed at the persistence of those embodied minor practices of online archive-keeping, rather than the actual material that is being collected in online archives. This is also how I approach the press photographs, music magazine articles, and video recordings kept in online spaces such as the Placebo Russia archive. Through these artefacts, I could re-activate the media texts that shaped Molko and his band's image in a place and time I had not directly witnessed. My fan experience resonates with De Kosnik's subsequent claim that "the action of treating media texts as archives has always been implicit or ignored in print culture but explicit and universally acknowledged in performance cultures" (De Kosnik 2016, p. 31). Popular music cultures have long established the idea of media texts as archives, for example when they allude to different periods in an artist's career as eras (which are often directly related to periods of self-stylization). Labelling earlier manifestations of an artist's identity performance cultivates the layering and organization of a variety of media texts into the overarching musical persona. For Molko, this happened with the 'Nancy Boy' trope, typified by the 1996-1999 bob hairstyle that fans continuously tried to identify a revival of, even decades after its original appearance. Even though Molko has consistently continued to wear eyeliner as a music artist, his style became noticeably less feminine and provocative over the span of years. The relatively brief Nancy Boy period that initiated his persona has, nevertheless, remained fundamentally anchored into the perception of his (evolving) musical persona.

Paired with Italian popular culture researcher Rachel Haworth's recent conceptualization of the relation between star images and personas, De Kosnik's performance studies lens engenders a particularly productive outlook on the persona phenomenon. Haworth refers to the concept of star image, as per cultural theorist Richard Dyer, as made out of a variety of media texts (1998, p. 60 cited by Haworth 2021). Although star image and persona may seem interchangeable in denoting an artist's self-presentation in a performance context, Haworth identifies star image as the depiction of a star (or artist) set in a specific moment that captures the result of an interaction with a particular medium. Persona, in contrast, is the

totality into which these different and evolving ‘images’ accrue over time (Haworth 2021). Star image is thus best understood as a composition of various media texts clustered around a certain time and/or space (similar to the abovementioned ‘era’), while persona is what arises out of the compilation of images over time, an accumulation that is never final. Haworth’s distinction demands we treat persona performance as an ongoing dialogical collection of media texts.

Fan archives accumulate media texts for the re-enactment of the abovementioned moments in time that substantiate an ever-growing overarching persona, albeit in collective memory or the individual minds of viewers. This delivers viable insights into the contemporary musical persona and the curation of identity performance. When we think of social media accounts as online repositories, we enable a comparable re-activation of (new) media texts that gather into a persona, where “the digital era calls for heightened emphasis on curation” (Burdick et al., cited in De Kosnik 2016, p. 34) in the domain of persona. Although De Kosnik stresses that corporate-owned social media platforms, unlike classic fan-maintained archives, don’t commit to the long-term preservation of material, they are similarly susceptible to the curation of seemingly ordinary aspects of identity performance cached in media texts. Social media run parallel to the logic of the fan archive, carefully convening even the most banal media texts that adhere to a certain appearance and meaning that an artist has conveyed at a particular moment in time.

Although Molko himself does not establish a current-day image by posting pictures (i.e. media texts) on personal social media accounts, fan accounts such as @brianmolkoworld on Instagram (Figure 7) and the Placebo Anyway Facebook page (Figure 8) continue to post the same quotes and images that have been distributed through the Placebo Russia archive alongside more recent press material of the band. The ongoing sharing of (older) media texts remind us that the cultural relevance of ‘Nancy Boy’, as proven by the rehash of the Stunt Girl shirt, as well as other persona enactments, depends on those media texts being constantly performed anew over time. In handing over the performative potential of the online archive to individual social media users, social media take the basic infrastructure behind the fan archive to the next level. The Instagram handle of the @brianmolkoworld account additionally invokes the concept of “worlding” that screen studies scholar Phoebe Macrossan borrowed from film theory in her discussion of pop artists’ episodic manifestations across media (Macrossan 2018). An Instagram account dedicated to Molko’s ‘world’ explicitly aligns the fundamentally non-linear and fragmented nature of persona with the equally non-linear and fragmented script of social media.

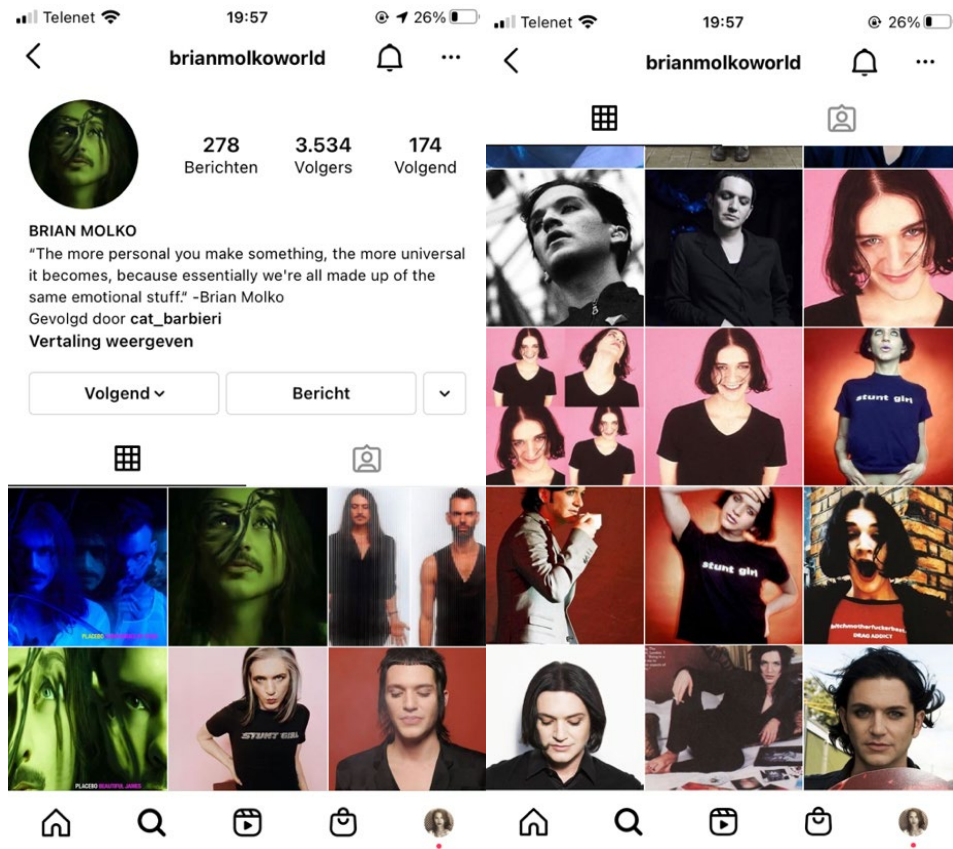


Figure 7. @brianmolkoworld on Instagram

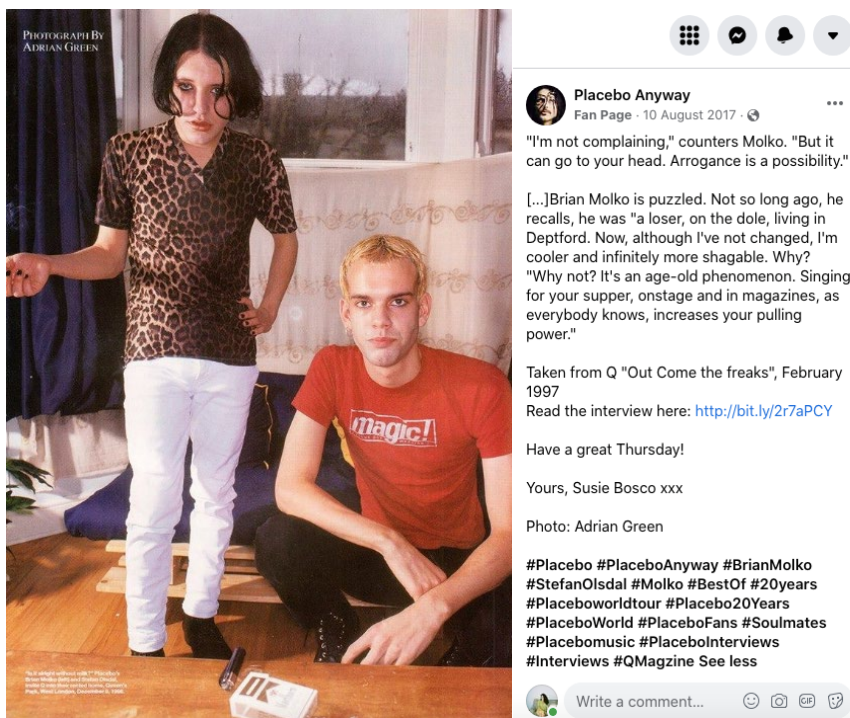


Figure 8. Placebo Anyway on Facebook. The same content is also shared on Instagram (@PlaceboAnyway) and Twitter (@PlaceboAnyway).

THE THEATRICAL EVERYDAYNESS OF NANCY BOY

The interplay between trivial details cached in media texts, which in turn feed into an overarching persona, is bound up with the increasingly entangled discourses of performativity and theatricality for persona. Earlier on, I identified the implicit focus on theatricality within the existing scope of musical persona research. In contrast to the performative, the theatrical brackets the exceptionality of an act(ion) as the departure from the conventional. Theatricality explicitly generates an alternative space of appearance where another script applies. A music persona that rearranges an ordinary appearance into a performance persona, equivalent to a significant segment of contemporary online persona activity, oftentimes creates a contradictory totality where the theatrical and the performative entwine. This is because the core business of enacting these forms of self-presentation still needs to be situated within the confines of everyday life, rather than outside of it (Féral in Reinelt 2002).

What makes this fluctuation very apparent for Molko's Nancy Boy, is the personal narrative that he entrusted to music magazines. Next to his visual identity flaunted in elaborate photoshoots, textual discourse is mainly concerned with his everyday identity prior to the band's existence and pins down the musician's displaced background as an "American-born son of a Luxembourg banker, raised in a culturally tepid Eurotown, and relapsed on a London Goldsmiths drama course" (Morton 1997). In response to questions about his teenage years spent in Luxembourg, Molko consistently opens up about the resistance he exercised towards the identity script that his family handed him: "There was a lot of loneliness involved and a lot of alienation, and I was surrounded by a lot of people who were trying to make me into themselves, and what it ended up doing was making me go: Fuck you, I'm going to forge my own identity at a very early age" (Morton 1997).

Accordingly, Molko models his artist identity onto an already existent everyday identity. His persona performance engulfs every element that relates to that self-proclaimed status as an outsider. Molko moulds and amplifies the identity marker of 'not fitting in' into an aestheticized form. In an interview with *Melody Maker* (16 August 1997), he even expresses this take on his musical persona: "Bowie has said he was interested in taking on different characters. I'm interested in exploring facets of myself and making them extreme". Molko's identity performance installs an 'ordinary extraordinariness': the facets he mentions do not need to be extreme in themselves, but the way he crafts a performance of the self out of an extremization of certain aspects of his everyday identity, is exactly what constitutes the identity he presents as a musician. In another *Melody Maker* interview from the same year, he restates the motivation behind his strategy of self-presentation:

Look, I don't want you to think that what I do onstage is like a Ziggy kind of character. When I step onstage, it gives me the freedom to be the person I've always wanted to be (...) It's not a character, it's a part of me which I can't bring out all the time. (*Melody Maker* 15 February 1997)

Music media at the time did make note of the in-betweenness that such self-presentation invoked. The French music magazine, *Les Inrockuptibles*, opened a lengthy interview by calling Molko more disturbing than theatrical shock rocker Marilyn Manson ("le théâtrique Marilyn Manson") and fraud Brett Anderson from British band Suede ("le falsificateur Brett Anderson") (Beauvallet 1998). Whereas Manson was easily identifiable as an outspoken act, Anderson's tempered androgynous appearance—which bore no roots in his daily-lived life—apparently equally came across as a form of theatrical performance. The use of the word 'disturbing' for Molko (the French "dérangeant") indirectly opens up the realm of the performative. Similar to how Judith Butler understands the performative process behind the social construct of gender,

Molko's blurry identity performance that lingers in between extraordinary and ordinary disturbs everyday gender conventions, more so than an outrageously extravagant identity performance.

The centrality of sexuality to Molko's identity performance is also reinforced in an *NME* interview about their first major American tour. In the interview, he expresses how he hopes that not playing in certain conservative cities might attract "(...) the right kind of audience. The ones for who Marilyn Manson is a fake and not sexual and more image-based" (Morton 1999). What he seems to hint at here, is how the shock value and provocative behaviour of Manson's identity performance passes in these conservative places, precisely because it is neatly demarcated as outside day-to-day reality. Molko's bisexuality, which in itself can hardly be regarded as radical, is from this perspective more transgressive because it does not operate in an alternate reality. What sets Molko apart is that he effectively manages to express the messiness of what he puts forward as part of his ordinary self. Performance philosopher Teemu Paavolainen regards performativity as "bringing forth some change in the world or, conversely, maintaining the status quo by means of reiterated naturalized practices" (2018, p. 2). The contestation of norms is often thought in unison with Butlerian performativity, but as Paavolainen highlights, it is important to be aware of how performative actions also reinstate existing scripts. He goes on that the usage of theatricality likewise wavers between being the innovative force of a historically avant-garde art form and belonging to the "derived realm of mere appearance, denying access to some allegedly prior, authentic, or essential domain of reality" (Paavolainen 2018, p. 1). Oscillating interpretations suggest that both theatricality and performativity "seem to fluctuate between conflicting values of novelty and normativity themselves" (Paavolainen 2018, p. 2), a trait visible in how both concepts prove relevant for Molko's persona.

Next to the performative qualities of his (sexual) identity, press materials contain equal amounts of allusions to theatricality. Located on the normative side of the continuum, these are often concerned with Molko's self-appointed "predilections for excess" (Morton 1999). When Molko is asked whether the band is "following some script for excess in their heads" (Segal 1998) in an interview for *NME*, the article directly addresses his excessiveness as theatrical. During the first few years of the band, the front man gained Placebo a reputation of being excessive and over the top, with lyrics that discussed a wide range of drugs and so-called sexual perversities on top of an (at times) confusingly feminine wardrobe. The combination of contentious statements in interviews along the lines of "having left a trail of blood and spunk all over the country" (Oldham 1998), and lyrics such as "slackerbitch, fag hag, whore" (*Slackerbitch* 1996) even momentarily granted the musician an accusation of misogyny, which is definitely at odds with the status of queer icon that he enjoys 20 years later (Jones 2017). This reception of his transgressions accentuates the flip side of theatrical excess leaning into bleakness, the cliché reinforcing how theatricality seems to be defined by both its "excess and its emptiness, its surplus as well as its lack" (Davis & Postlewait in Paavolainen 2018, p. 48). What the double-sidedness of the media texts involved in Molko's persona illustrates is how the use of performative elements of a precarious identity, a term I use cautiously but is most prominently gender related for Molko, does not exclude the simultaneous presence of theatricality altogether. Precisely the dispositive of persona in a music context allows the staging performative elements in a theatrical way, and vice versa, introducing an ordinary extraordinariness.

THE TAILORED RANDOMNESS OF THE MEDIA WHORE

“Dog boy, media whore, it’s who the hell you take me for”, read the lyrics on the fourth track of the *Without You I’m Nothing* album, *Ask for Answers* (1998). The ‘media whore’ reference in the song taps into the duality of mediatized culture: even though it progressively naturalizes media performance as part of music artists’ identity, being overtly and overly present in media devalues that same identity performance. Precisely this tension informs the ordinariness of the extraordinary identity that Molko claimed and developed into a unique aesthetic as vital for his artistic practice as Placebo’s music. His televisual and print magazine performances often explicitly demonstrate an aversion to his representation in British tabloid culture. He has regularly pointed out how music media imposed a sensationalist lens, for instance by calling them “(...) irritating fuckers who want you to be glamorous, over the top rock stars and then when you are they hold it against you” (Cornwell 1999). Simultaneously, he carries on using these exact platforms to air his dirty laundry and amplify the quotidian grit of his self-proclaimed outsider status. He draws the mediatized gaze exerted upon him into the identity that he curates. By playing into the hands of the media in a confessional mode, he embodies a convergence of a spectacle-oriented structure and his everyday identity, where the novelty of performative actions goes hand in hand with a perpetuation of the normativity of a dominant medium script.

Persona, in this constellation, is therefore more accurately thought of as ‘curated’ than ‘created’. To adorn oneself with theatrical props and strategies makes way for more subtle yet crucial selection mechanisms of what to share, emphasize, highlight, and stylize. A professedly meaningless detail that perpetually reaffirmed Molko’s curated paradigm at the time of his Nancy Boy period is the special significance held by London’s South Kensington station. This underground station was where Molko and Olsdal met again by chance after vaguely knowing each other at high school in Luxembourg, and became a standard recapitulative of the band Placebo’s formation in early interviews with the band (e.g. Yates 1997, Fortnam 1997). Within Molko’s persona narrative, the random location and accidental meeting have become a site of memory that forms another thread of his former Luxembourg loser identity woven into a particular episode of his persona that is still being celebrated.

What I have tried to unfold through my idiosyncratic account of Molko’s persona in the fan archive, is how personas’ advanced interactions with the ordinary act upon and amplify the curatorial approach of Molko’s early identity performance. By turning a performance studies lens on online fan archives, I concurrently understand persona as an ongoing gamut of media texts. The way in which the ‘media whore’ Molko tailors what is to hand, in retrospect, draws in questions about the status of musical persona when it tunes in to the strategic identity performances propelled by the early stages of a presentational media regime. His musical persona reflects upon representational media’s demand to perform, parallel to how social media’s continuous stimulation of self-performance assimilates into new everyday identities. Precisely in its negotiation of an ordinary extraordinariness resides the exceptionality of Molko’s identity performance for a wider-ranging understanding of persona’s recent developments. His figure oscillates between the extraordinary rock star construct on the one hand, and on the other the innovative performance of a new identity, equally accrued and curated, that claims to be ordinary. This movement sees the frameworks of performativity and theatricality collapse into each other and foreshadows the crafted yet naturalized self-presentation of the “socially mediated musician” (Baym 2016, p. 47).

Through his interlacement of onstage acts and traditional media representation with a budding presentational mode, Molko enacts a persona that is far more complex than the

straightforward reading of gender-bending icon that he is usually given. Hovering over the unstable categories of ordinary, extraordinary, and extravagant, Molko's case reinforces the insightful context that pop music—and its obsession with authenticity in an increasingly staged environment—provides for unpacking the mutability of the persona concept. Yates (1997), the author of the *Out Come the Freaks* article, writes “Molko is as his lyrics suggest, an elusive fella. Perhaps he is as interested in building a character, Ziggy Stardust-style, as he is in revealing himself”. This sharp observation not only identifies the cultural significance of a seminal musician in British rock at the dawn of a new millennium. It also captures how presentational persona practices, preoccupied with the everyday in their naturalization of a strategically designed identity, possess the potential to transform the ordinary into a lifestyle.

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