

PERSONAL STORYWORLDS: RETROSPECTION, REINVENTION, AND TRANSMEDIALITY IN POP MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

By combining perspectives from transmedial narratology and musicology, this article explores how the notion of a “personal storyworld” can offer new opportunities for understanding the transmedial processes whereby pop artists’ personas are continually (re-)constructed and (re-)negotiated through and across myriad points of contact between artists and audiences. Emphasis is placed on the performative potential of audiovisual aesthetics and public posturing, on the one hand, and on audiences’ interpretive flexibility, on the other. These related themes are addressed through a case study of an artist who aptly exemplifies the continual transfiguration of pop personas, namely Justin Bieber. The main part of the case study concerns how Bieber’s sixth studio album, Justice (2021), and associated material (music videos, live performances, interviews, promotional material, social media posts) related to and formed part of his broader personal storyworld. This sets up an exploration of how the dynamics between retrospection and reinvention shape the reframing of personas, which raises a series of questions concerning the dialectic between continuity and change, artist-audience dynamics, and transmedial processes of interpretation.

KEY WORDS

Popular Music; Persona; Personal Storyworlds; Transmediality; Narrativity; Justin Bieber

INTRODUCTION

The artist persona represents a principal focal point of popular music culture. As a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated (see Auslander 2021; Gracyk 2017; Hansen 2019; Hawkins 2020), our perceptions of artists inform our aesthetic experiences, interpretations of songs’ meanings, and ethical evaluations of musical performances. Personas are flexible and dynamic, even if they are often seen to provide a relatively stable representation of an artist’s subjectivity over time and in different contexts. This duality points to the intricate ways in which our perceptions of pop personas are shaped by musical aesthetics and visual style, lyrical sentiments, the characters artists portray in songs and music videos, how artists present themselves in interviews and live performances, album artwork and promotional images, glimpses of artists’ private lives on social media, and many other elements. Overall, the myriad points of contact between artists and audiences give rise to complex personal storyworlds that unfold across disparate media channels and contexts.

In this article, I discuss how the notion of a “personal storyworld” can offer new opportunities for understanding the transmedial processes whereby pop artists’ personas are (re-)constructed and (re-)negotiated in different ways and over time. By building on scholarship in transmedial narratology (Herman 2009; Ryan 2015; Ryan and Thon 2014; Thon 2016) and musicology (Burns 2019; Hawkins 2020), I advocate a conception of artists’ personal

storyworlds as expansive networks of interrelated narratives, symbols, and signs, generated through and across multiple points of contact between artists and audiences. Extending Keith Negus' compelling argument that "the application of narrative theory to popular music must inevitably and fruitfully move beyond the world of the text and allied media to a much wider universe" (2012, p. 369), I grapple with how pop personas gain their significance in relation to a broad range of intersecting aesthetic, gestural, and discursive dimensions. Placing emphasis on the performative potential of audiovisual aesthetics and public posturing, on the one hand, and on interpretive expansiveness, on the other, provides fruitful focal points for navigating the wealth of material that comprises pop personas.

While it can be argued that all of us present personas to the world around us, the degree to which the personal and professional lives of famous musicians (and other celebrities) are documented and scrutinised intensifies the multifaceted performative and interpretive processes by which artists' personas are constructed and circulated across different media channels and contexts. For the purposes of this article, I define the pop persona as a complex of ideas about "who an artist is" (see Hansen 2019). These ideas are co-created on the performance and reception ends of popular music, in the interplay between the wealth of material that artists present to the public and audiences' flexible interpretations of this material. I approach and understand this interplay in light of Paul Ricoeur's suggestion that there is significant "complementarity between fictional and empirical narratives" (1983, p. 4), a point that underscores my discussions throughout.

Musicians with successful careers and certain "star qualities" that garner global attention arguably provide the richest case studies of how pop personas arise, evolve, and are negotiated. Music scholar and cultural theorist Richard Elliott has addressed this issue:

Popular musicians with long careers provide rich source material for the study of persona, authenticity, endurance and the maintenance (and reinvention) of significant bodies of work. Successful artists' songs create a soundtrack not only to their own lives, but also to those of their audiences, and to the times in which they were created and to which they bore witness. (2019, p. 19)

Elliott's argument concerns ageing artists who continue to perform after several decades, and he views the retrospection that is allowed for by these artists' long careers as integral to how artists and audiences construct, de-construct, and re-construct the persona (*ibid.*). While taking inspiration from Elliott's interest in the multiplicity afforded by veteran performers' diverse catalogues and eventful biographies, I would suggest that the prosperous careers of younger artists too can allow for elements of retrospection, experience, and re-construction to inform the performance and reception of musical personas in intriguing ways.

Many of the twenty-first century's most prominent pop stars had their international breakthroughs in their teens. Examples include Adele, Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Billie Eilish, Rihanna, Harry Styles, Taylor Swift, Zayn, and many others. These artists' careers and lives have been widely documented, given the proliferation of social media and expansion of online fan discourse in the late 2000s and 2010s. Tyler Bickford (2020, pp. 18–20, p. 28) has addressed this issue in his work on tween pop, noting that changes in the dynamics of the music industry and emerging forms of public intimacy in the twenty-first century introduced a shift in how young artists were positioned in mainstream pop culture. As Bickford (*ibid.*, p. 141, pp. 159–166) suggests, new mutual influences between social media and public culture both impacted how artists engaged their audiences and greatly increased audiences' access to their favourite artists, creative output and (ostensibly) private lives.¹ The point I am arriving at is this: the career trajectories of contemporary pop stars differ in certain ways from those of previous

generations of artists, in the sense that their participation in an intensified online public culture from the outset of their careers has proliferated and diversified audiences' points of access to their personas. Far from affirming the democratisation of culture in the digital era,² I raise this point in order to call attention to the multiplicity that characterises the creative oeuvres and personas of many present-day pop stars – even if the longevity of their careers does not rival that of older artists. One notable dimension of this multiplicity relates to the aesthetic plurality that flourishes in pop music (see Hansen 2022, p. 9, p. 127), which feeds into the continual transfiguration of artists' personas and prompts consideration of the dialectic between theatricality and authenticity that tends to characterise pop performances.³

My discussions in this article revolve around a case study of an artist who aptly exemplifies this, namely Justin Bieber. The focus falls partly on how Bieber's sixth studio album, *Justice* (2021), and associated material (music videos, live performances, interviews, promotional material, social media posts) related to and formed part of what I conceive of as his broader personal storyworld. This sets up an exploration of how the dynamics between retrospection and reinvention shape the reframing of personas, which raises a series of questions concerning the dialectic between continuity and change, artist-audience dynamics, and transmedial processes of interpretation. To prepare the ground for addressing the significance of these themes for Bieber's persona, I begin by unpacking some theoretical and methodological considerations for investigating how pop artists' personal storyworlds are shaped by, for example, musical and visual aesthetics, biographical details, and public discourse.

PERSONAL STORYWORLDS AS TRANSMEDIAL PHENOMENA

The term “storyworld” has been popularised in narratology and media studies over the past few decades, where it has generally been used to refer to how various narrative elements evoke broader fictional worlds. David Herman elaborates:

Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted – of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why and in what manner. Reciprocally, narrative artifacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds. (2009, pp. 106–107)

Pointing out that different types of cultural texts offer distinct contributions to narrative forms of worldmaking, Herman (ibid., pp. 107–108) identifies multiplicity as a key element of the narrative processes that shape storyworlds. Books, photographs, movies, music, and other cultural texts tell stories in disparate ways and add unique dimensions to our experiences and understandings of complex storyworlds.

Emphasising the flexible relationships between multiple texts, Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan Noël Thon have directed attention to “the expansion of transmedial storyworlds across multiple media” (Ryan and Thon 2014, p. 1). From a transmedial perspective, we can understand storyworlds as emerging when numerous texts from different media (and these texts' myriad narrative and symbolic gestures) are grouped together within a single frame of reference. This places world-building at least partly in the hands of the interpreter (reader, listener, viewer). As Ryan and Thon suggest, while authors, musicians, filmmakers, and other creative agents contribute to the creation of “the storyworld through the production of signs, it is the reader, spectator, listener, or player who uses the blueprint of a finished text to construct a mental image of this world” (ibid., p. 2; see also Herman 2009, pp. 106–107). This points to the

flexibility with which audiences infer the potential meanings afforded by individual cultural texts and navigate systems of interrelated texts. Given that storyworlds can be navigated in myriad ways, they should not be understood as simply representing the dispersion of a single, coherent, and linear story across multiple media. Rather, as Ryan has argued, transmedial storyworlds encompass “a variety of autonomous stories, or episodes, contained in various documents. What holds these stories together is that they take place in the same storyworld” (2015, p. 4). The unfolding of stories across media can involve both continuity and multiplicity/discontinuity (see Jenkins 2011), which entails that the meanings afforded by individual texts can either disrupt or support an interpreter’s understanding of the broader storyworld. As such, storyworlds can comprise a conglomerate of non-chronological, non-linear, and open-ended narratives, as well as a range of mutually supportive and/or contradictory symbols and signs.

Against this conceptual and theoretical background, I want to propose that we can approach the multiple cultural narratives and social significances associated with pop personas through the notion of the “personal storyworld”. I have briefly touched on this idea in my previous work (Hansen 2019), which forms the basis for my attempt to develop it more fully here. My starting point is that pop personas are multiply constructed through songs, music videos, live performances, artwork, promotional material, interview statements, and other public material, shaped by the complex interrelations between these different cultural artifacts and the innumerable discourses and narratives they activate for audiences. Given this complexity, pop personas are unfixed and changeable. Unlike some prominent scholars working in the field of popular music and personas (e.g., Auslander 2021, pp. 10–14; Moore 2012, pp. 179–184), I am less concerned with how the persona is articulated through various performance settings and more concerned with how the full breadth of artists’ public activities feed into ideas about “who they are” as people. As such, I endorse Stan Hawkins’ argument that “[e]ngaging with personas involves accessing specific social spaces and places; personas revolve around social politics, directly from the inter(con)textual circumstances of a specific genre and period” (2020, p. 250). From this perspective, understanding pop personas involves investigating the intricate interrelationships between musical and visual aesthetics, personal narrativity,⁴ and social politics.

A transmedial approach aptly accommodates such a task. As Lori Burns has suggested, music scholars are now increasingly “recognizing tremendous potential for transmedia approaches to popular music” (2019, p. 332) – something that is further demonstrated by the current special issue. Focusing on the diverse materials (musical and otherwise) produced in the popular music sphere, Burns asserts that “[t]hese materials have the potential to build powerful stories about human experience that play out in our textual, sonic and visual imaginations” (ibid., p. 333). Such powerful stories, I would suggest, often revolve around and/or influence perceptions of the artist persona – granted that the star appeal of artists is among popular music’s core commodities (see Baym 2018, p. 25; Meier 2017, pp. 32–34, pp. 74–84). From this perspective, the transmedial processes of popular music performance and reception tend to centre artists and their representations of identity. The multilayered nature of these processes challenge music scholars to “develop new analytic modalities in order to understand and interpret the compelling stories of human experience and subjectivity that emerge” (Burns 2019, p. 348), which is part of the impetus for the current article.

Through my conceptualisation of the “personal storyworld”, I home in on audiences’ investment in the personal identities and life experiences of artists and explore the ways in which these are gleaned from disparate texts and contexts. As such, the concept of a personal storyworld refers to how multiple points of contact between artists and audiences provide

opportunities for constructing and re-constructing the persona. The notion of the personal storyworld is especially useful for contemplating the unfixed, changeable nature of personas, because it directs attention to the multiplicity of symbols and signs that influence our perceptions of pop artists. Ryan's suggestion that "[p]eople are willing to look for information in many documents and across multiple platforms because they are so in love with the storyworld that they cannot get enough information about it" (2015, p. 4) holds relevance also for audiences' interest in the personal lives and identities of stars (however we define the criteria for stardom). But songs, music videos, interviews, and other individual elements all give incomplete information about "who an artist is". As with encounters of fictional storyworlds, then, audiences need to "use their (actual as well as fictional) world knowledge to 'fill in the gaps,' to infer aspects of the storyworld that are only implicitly represented" (Thon 2016, p. 46). When immersing themselves in artists' personal storyworlds, audiences "fill in the gaps" by relying on their knowledge of various musical genres, artist biographies, cultural contexts, social discourses, and so on – thereby co-constructing the persona through their inferences.

This brief discussion brings me to the following point, which is simple yet necessary to make: studying artists' personal storyworlds simultaneously involves both "working out the *strategies* invested by performers as they present themselves to the world" (Hawkins 2020, p. 240, original emphasis) and being attentive to the flexibility with which audiences navigate the wealth of material that is available to them and ascribe meaning to their experiences. This premise guides the following exploration of Justin Bieber's personal storyworld. A primary strand of inquiry concerns how the dynamics between retrospection and reinvention shape both the performance and reception of his persona. While the abbreviated analysis presented here cannot adequately account for the myriad elements that factor into how pop personas are constructed and understood, I nonetheless hope to demonstrate how the concept of the "personal storyworld" offers new opportunities for contemplating these processes.

REPURPOSING THE PAST: RETROSPECTION AND MATURATION

Now at the onset of his thirties, Justin Bieber (born 1994) has been an international pop star for half of his life. Every single one of his six studio albums to date have debuted atop the *Billboard* 200 chart and he is the youngest artist in history to have had more than 100 songs on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. Rising to fame when he was only fifteen years old with the release of the hit single *Baby* (2010), Bieber's early career became tinged by long-standing prejudices that connect young male singers, pop music, and inauthenticity. The pathologizing rhetoric of "Bieber fever" denigrated and infantilised both Bieber himself and his predominantly female fans, contributing to a career trajectory that saw Bieber oppose notions of childishness through scandalous behaviour and the introduction of more adult-oriented themes in his lyrics and videos (Hansen 2022, pp. 102–106). Following a period characterised by various controversies and several run-ins with the law, Bieber cancelled the final dates of his Purpose World Tour in July 2017 and alluded to personal struggles and mental health issues as the main causes for this decision (Beaumont-Thomas 2017). The incident precipitated a two-and-a-half-year period in which Bieber largely stayed out of the public eye. When he returned with a new album in 2020, aptly titled *Changes*, this signalled the rehabilitation of his persona and an emphasis on themes of personal growth, religious faith, and his relationship with his wife (Hansen 2022, pp. 107–109, pp. 126–127). As Bieber's personal storyworld expanded with the release of his sixth studio album, *Justice* (2021), these three themes were extended in ways that continued to highlight Bieber's maturation both as an artist and as a man – even as past events in his career and personal life still loomed large.

The notion of maturation that was foregrounded in Bieber's self-presentation in the early 2020s gained its significance in relation to his professional and personal history, to the extent that these had been made available to the public. Many fans would surely be familiar with Bieber's early career as a teen star and the controversies that characterised the following period of his life, both of which provided frames of reference for understanding how he rehabilitated his persona after returning to the spotlight in 2020. Further supporting Bieber's rehabilitated image, *Justice* ostensibly signalled a shift in his approach to musicmaking. Promoting the album on the social media platform Instagram, Bieber asserted:

In a time when there's so much wrong with this broken planet we all crave healing and justice for humanity. In creating this album my goal is to make music that will provide comfort, to make songs that people can relate to and connect to so they feel less alone. [...] I know that I cannot simply solve injustice by making music but I do know that if we all do our part by using our gifts to serve this planet and each other that we are that much closer to being united. This is me doing a small part. My part.⁵

Through the title of the album and the way it was promoted via social media, Bieber claimed social responsibility and put himself in a position to help resolve cultural tensions. Even as he acknowledged the limited capacity of music to "solve injustice", he asserted the social significance of his artistry and challenged the common accusation that his music (and pop music more generally) is trivial.

The expansion of Bieber's storyworld indicated by his new-found support of social justice causes was accentuated by how the sentiment of maturation circulated in the media discourse surrounding the album, with critics describing *Justice* as "the most mature thing in Bieber's catalogue" (Jenkins 2021) and representing "a new and mature outlook on life" (O'Connor 2021). The significance of the album for Bieber's persona was explicitly addressed by some commenters, as in Keith Harris' review for *Rolling Stone*: "The message of *Justice*, then, is that Justin Bieber is an adult" (Harris 2021). Notably, these three reviews (and several others) all highlighted a retrospective view of Bieber's career and focused as much on what the album revealed about his personal transformation as on its musical qualities. The two – Bieber's personal transformation and his musical material – have frequently been connected, as when Roisin O'Connor suggested that Bieber "has grown up" and that "[t]he musicianship in these new songs holds a mirror to this newfound maturity" (O'Connor 2021). Many responses to the aforementioned Instagram post likewise celebrated "the new Justin" and the social justice messaging of the new album,⁶ which shows how Bieber's fans also participated in ascribing maturity to his persona. Overall, the public reception of *Justice* illustrated both the tendency of critics and audiences to seek out connections between artists' music and their personal lives and the common strategy on artists' part of teasing or even explicitly promoting such connections.

Rarely has the strategy of highlighting connections between musical material and the artist's biography been illustrated more clearly than in the case of *Lonely*, which was released in October of 2020 as the second single from *Justice*. The song was written by Bieber in collaboration with well-known producers Benny Blanco and Finneas, who also co-produced the song. *Lonely* can be described as a pop ballad with a minimalist arrangement consisting mainly of vocals and an electric piano accompaniment. This minimalist arrangement allows the lyrics to claim the listener's attention.

The lyrics seem to describe Bieber's personal struggles with fame and especially his troubled adolescence: "And everybody saw me sick / And it felt like no one gave a shit / They

criticized the things I did as an idiot kid". The seemingly autobiographical nature of the lyrics prompts careful consideration of the tendency to interpret pop lyrics as expressions of artists' personal experiences and beliefs:

Perhaps one of the defining traits of the popular music persona, in contrast to the personas of other stars and celebrities, is the ingrained tendency in popular song to conflate the "I" of the singer with the "I" of the lyric. The processes whereby the opinions, desires, and intentions of lyrical protagonists are confused with those of the composers and performers who bring them to life is part of the authenticating work done by popular musicians and their fans. (Elliott 2019, p. 22)

The conflation and confusion that Elliott describes, I would argue, are often encouraged by artists and their teams. This happens in diverse ways. For one, impressions about the relationship between song lyrics and the artist's personal life are regulated at least partly by musical aesthetics. The point that song lyrics are experienced and understood not simply as words on a page but rather in light of their articulation as part of a multifaceted musical event might seem self-evident, but musical aesthetics remain overlooked in many discussions of lyrics' meanings. In the case of *Lonely*, the minimalist arrangement affords a sense of intimacy similar to that associated with the singer-songwriter tradition of "confessional" and "emotionally authentic" modes of performance (see Hansen 2019, p. 520; Negus 2011, p. 623). The emotional authenticity is heightened in the choruses when Bieber sings "I'm so lo-o-o-o-o-onely" in a prolonged howl (approx. 00:59). His vocals are compressed and placed front and centre in the mix, so that the listener can tune in to the most minute details of his mournful cry. The descending melody accentuates the sentiment of sadness, and there is a loss of momentum during this part of the song (which occurs when the piano abandons its steady rhythmic motif to create even more space for Bieber's voice) that musically reinforces the sentiment of loneliness. By heightening the sense of intimacy and emotional intensity of Bieber's vocal performance, these musical details contribute to further blurring the line between the protagonist of the song and the artist himself.

This blurring extends beyond the sound recording to the material that accompanied and framed *Lonely*. The single artwork depicts Canadian actor Jason Tremblay as a young version of Bieber, dressed in the iconic white and purple outfit worn by Bieber in his early career and with his signature hairstyle. The picture is taken from the song's music video, directed by Jake Schreier, in which Tremblay re-enacts a young Bieber's experiences as a teen star. Shot in one continuous take, the video follows Tremblay on the uncomfortable walk from an empty dressing room to an empty concert hall. The one-shot visual narrative indicates the apparent absence of editing trickery and thus reinforces the sense of emotional authenticity that is afforded by the lyrics and musical elements. At the end of the video, the camera zooms out to reveal the "real", adult Bieber as the only person in the audience. The camera pans around to a close-up of him, as the video ends with the artist staring contemplatively at the younger version of himself. The juxtaposition of the two Biebers (see Figure 1) opens up a discursive space wherein the past is repurposed in service of reframing the present. By reflecting on and narrating Bieber's experiences during his early career, the video reveals new areas of his personal storyworld and thus reframes his present-day persona.

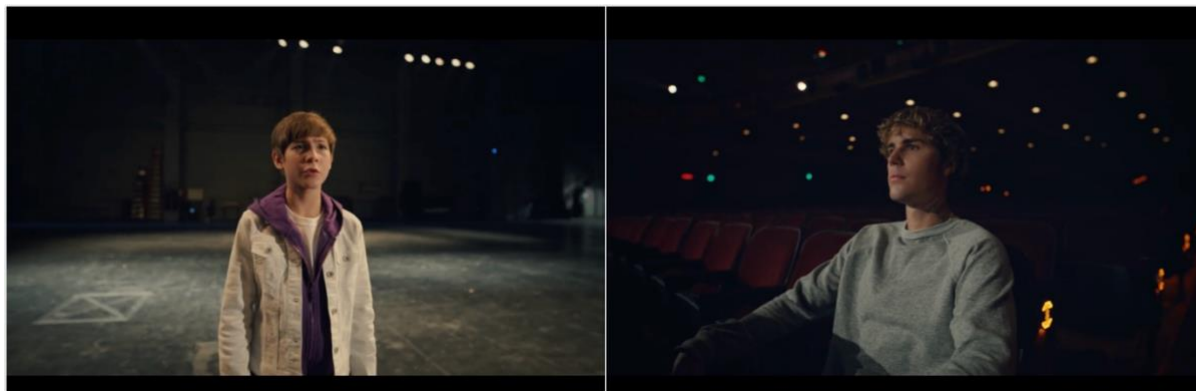


Figure 1. Screenshots from *Lonely* (2020, dir. Jake Schreier).

The multiple forms in which songs tend to exist – sound recordings, remixes, music videos, live performances, and so on – can inform the reframing of an artist’s persona in varied (overlapping or contradictory) ways.⁷ When Bieber performed *Lonely* on *Saturday Night Live* in October 2020,⁸ fans who had already seen the music video would recognise that Bieber was re-enacting its visual narrative. This could add a layer to the emotional impact of the live performance, but those who had not seen the video would still register the emotional intensity with which Bieber addressed his struggles with the past. When he sang “Everybody knows my past now / Like my house was always made of glass / Maybe that’s the price you pay for the money and fame at an early age” at the start of the second verse, his singing took on a more urgent quality, his body language changed to indicate emotional distress, and his face contorted in a pained expression. In contrast to the music video, wherein Bieber himself only appears at the end and remains near expressionless, the live performance shows Bieber embody the emotional pain he sings about – both vocally and physically. From this perspective, the live performance could serve to further authenticate the sentiment of the lyrics vis-à-vis his present-day persona by showcasing his supposed emotional earnestness.⁹

How Bieber’s past was used as a resource for reframing his persona in the early 2020s is further illustrated by two documentary films released in connection with the *Justice* album, *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter* (2020) and *Justin Bieber: Our World* (2021),¹⁰ both of which dwell heavily on Bieber’s previous struggles and personal growth. Parts of *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter*, especially, address the unique significance of *Lonely* as a personal song for Bieber. In a scene where Bieber watches the music video, he notes that “I was so surrounded, millions of people in the audience, but I still felt lonely, I still felt misunderstood, I still felt hurt. I actually teared up in that video when I was watching Jacob Tremblay [...] play me” (approx. 13:45–14:03). This discussion of *Lonely* becomes a point of entry for Bieber to open up about how public criticism and denigration affected him negatively and led to suicidal thoughts (approx. 15:55). It is made clear that this part of his past still affects him: a retelling of how Bieber broke down crying when attempting to record the song is accompanied by candid photographs that show him in the studio, hiding his face (approx. 15:38–15:46). The candid nature of the photographs, seemingly taken spontaneously without Bieber knowing, reinforces the idea that they offer viewers a raw glimpse into Bieber’s personal experience of recording the song. The studio incident is also recounted in a feature article in *Billboard* magazine, in which it provides context for producer benny blanco’s description of Bieber’s performance on *Lonely* as “the most honest Justin you’re going to get” (Bain 2021). This illustrates how certain elements of artists’ personal storyworlds are dispersed across multiple different channels and serve as navigational beacons that guide audiences’ interpretations. The main emphasis of the narratives presented in *Justin Bieber: Next*

Chapter and the *Billboard* article was on Bieber overcoming personal challenges. Arguably, this tied in with the primary message afforded by the visual juxtaposition of two Biebers in the music video: present-day Bieber is able to confront his past struggles and learn something from them.

A similar idea features in another scene of *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter*, when Bieber muses, “[n]ow we can hopefully tell this story and make a difference in somebody else’s world” (18:42–18:46). The statement is followed by a concrete example of how Bieber might make a difference for others, namely by being a mentor for young artists and helping them navigate the music industry and deal with impending fame. In a segment that shows Bieber playing music and talking with Eddie Benjamin, an Australian singer-songwriter at the cusp of international success, the conversation turns towards the pressures of stardom. As Bieber takes on the role of mentor, he recounts his own personal struggles in the hope that Benjamin might learn from his mistakes (approx. 20:13–21:25). Through this interaction, Bieber’s transformation from unruly teen star to matured pop veteran is placed on full display. Benjamin has also been outspoken about the support he has received from Bieber, noting in one interview that Bieber “really cares [...] He’s given me lots of great advice” (Campbell 2021). When Benjamin supported Bieber on his Justice World Tour in 2022, one news article equated this with “getting a masterclass [from Bieber] in being a pop star” (Shafer 2022). While the public attention given to the close relationship between Benjamin and Bieber might have served to increase Benjamin’s visibility and credibility in the pop mainstream, it simultaneously buttressed Bieber’s status as a mentor and called further attention to his personal maturation.

These brief examples show how, in the early 2020s, revisiting the past served as a step for Bieber towards shaping a legible persona in the present. His broader storyworld, with narrative strands extending back to his early life and career, provided rich material for both Bieber and his fans to contend with and make sense of “the changes that are wrought upon artists’ personas as they encounter shifts in fame and fortune” (Elliott 2019, p. 21). While the selective curation of glimpses into Bieber’s biography and personal experiences regulated audiences’ access to his personal life and thereby informed perceptions of his persona, these are not straightforward or uncomplicated processes. Quite the opposite, artists’ personas are continuously re-framed and re-negotiated as audiences “fill in the gaps” (Thon 2016, p. 46) of artists’ personal storyworlds in varied and unpredictable ways. Understanding these processes requires careful consideration of the changeable relationships between the many elements and circumstances that play their part in shaping our perceptions of pop personas.

REFRAMING AND REINVENTING PERSONAS: LAYERS, SHIFTS, AND TENSIONS

Granted that our perceptions of pop personas are subject to change as artists continue to release music and we encounter new elements of their personal storyworlds, the temporal dimensions of artist-audience relationships represent a significant influence on fan cultures in popular music. Directing attention to the “waxing, waning and second comings of pop careers across the life courses of artists and their audiences”, Elliott suggests that certain artists “are notable for reinventing and reframing their careers” (2019, p. 19). One aspect of this concerns artists’ play with different musical styles, visual expressions, and lyrical themes, and developments in artists’ creative output or expressive gestures can either disrupt or support our existing impressions of their personas. Mainstream pop music, especially, represents an arena wherein a pronounced stylistic plurality has been conventionalised to the point that artists’ continuous reinvention has come to be expected.

Bieber is one artist who exemplifies this tendency well. Ever since his emergence as a teen star at the onset of the 2010s, Bieber's integration of traditionally Black musical traditions (R&B; hip hop; soul) within a broader pop aesthetic has been both controversial and bound up with a range of discourses related to, for example, age, gender, and musical ability (Bickford 2020, pp. 142–144; Hansen 2022, pp. 103–104). Over the course of his career, Bieber has shown a willingness to traverse diverse stylistic landscapes and experiment with different aesthetic expressions. One might go as far as suggesting that stylistic diversity has become one of Bieber's musical trademarks, a sentiment that has been embraced by the music press – as exemplified by reviews of *Justice* (Lipshutz 2021; O'Connor 2021). This discourse created space for Bieber's distinctive vocal performance and (seemingly) personal lyrics to be understood as particularly compelling points of access to his persona: "Consistent amid the hairpin shifts in style that *Justice* throws the listener from song to song are Bieber's slick vocals and earnest, honest lyricism. [...] He is coming to terms with who he once was, who he is now, and who he wants to become" (Jenkins 2021). From this perspective, the musical eclecticism of *Justice* can be understood to have added colour and nuance to Bieber's artistic expression in ways that supported rather than disrupted the perceived stability of his persona.

Bieber's musical eclecticism has been mirrored by his wilful exploration of different visual styles, lyrical themes, and expressions of identity, which is exemplified by the music videos released alongside the *Justice* album. Whereas *Lonely* is framed as a personal reflection on his past struggles, *Anyone* (2021, dir. Colin Tilley) shows Bieber covering up all of his tattoos and playing the part of a professional boxer. In *Holy* (2020, dir. Colin Tilley), the video for a pop-gospel song in which Bieber seemingly professes both his love for his wife and his devotion to God,¹¹ he portrays a working-class man who loses his job. In *Ghost* (2021, dir. Colin Tilley), Bieber plays the role of someone mourning the death of his father. These videos hold the potential – both individually and collectively – to influence impressions of Bieber's personal life and identity, his positioning within aesthetic traditions and musical genre conventions, his star power, and much more. Through their encounters with Bieber's vivid portrayals of different characters, as well as his lyrical engagement with and visual representation of diverse themes, critics and fans are offered new opportunities for contemplating the relationship between the art and the artist.

Just like he assumes many different characters and addresses a range of themes in his songs and music videos, Bieber expresses diverse opinions, beliefs, and values in interviews, public statements, and social media posts – each of which can be taken to foreground or downplay certain aspects of his personal storyworld. However, Bieber's oscillation between theatrical playfulness and (ostensibly) authentic self-expression does not necessarily disrupt audiences' impressions of his persona. Rather, it signals the *elasticity* of personas – their capacity to simultaneously comprise reinvention and constancy.

In his discussion of the personas of popular musicians with extended careers, Elliott suggests that these artists tend to be understood either as "shapeshifters" or as curating a "consistent, layered self":

It would be a mistake, however, to think of these categories as exclusive binaries; the shape-shifting aspect of a star might be the most consistent thing about them, while the seeming consistency of the gradually layered self relies on the accumulation of multiple selves, some of which might be as varied as the shifting light across a landscape. We should instead consider a dynamic or dialectic tension between shape-shifting and layering [...] (Elliott 2019, p. 20)

As Elliott argues, shapeshifting and layering are not mutually exclusive. In the case of Bieber's display of mentorship in *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter*, for example, he took on a new role that clearly separated his present-day persona from the negative discourse of immaturity that surrounded his early career. At the same time, it was exactly the experiences he gained from tackling that discourse that were seen to qualify him to mentor younger artists. The shift in Bieber's self-presentation from irresponsible troublemaker to trustworthy mentor was made legible (and plausible) because of the retrospective narrative that mapped out his path to personal growth. The extent to which this particular element of Bieber's self-presentation impacts audiences' perceptions of his persona will inevitably vary, however. The core argument here is bound up with the premise that audiences co-create artists' personas through their interpretations of songs, music videos, and other texts (ibid., p. 19; Hansen 2019, pp. 513–515), and the concept of the personal storyworld opens onto the transmedial processes by which audiences navigate the dialectic between shapeshifting and layering. As Ryan and Thon argue, the “convergence of media around a common center that we may call ‘narrativity’ – a center that is itself organized around a storyworld – will serve as an opportunity to capture their distinctive narrative resources” (2014, p. 2). While it is possible to assess how different elements are likely to shape artists' personas, then, any attempt to say something about the relations between different elements and their significance for the broader personal storyworld must move beyond a consideration of individual texts and toward the complex social and cultural circumstances within which artist-audience relationships develop.

Emphasising the intersubjective and intercontextual aspects of popular music culture, Negus asserts that there is a plurality of “complex narrative meanings that are emergent in and articulated to many single pop songs, due to their embedding in a broader social and cultural context” (2012, p. 370). He suggests that our search for deeper meanings and narratives in songs and associated material inevitably “disrupts the stability of a text and points outward at the real drama of performative actions (rather than the perceived drama of the music), toward the ‘social and cultural’ tensions of the human world” (ibid.). The artist persona is a central point of mediation between individual texts and the social and cultural tensions of the human world, I would suggest, however tacitly this is manifested. This perspective is aligned to Hawkins' argument that “[p]ersonas come replete with pleasures, anxieties, and politics [...] Their effect is to get us to reflect on the significance of gender, race, class, sexuality, and many other qualities of identity” (2020, p. 250). It is arguably in relation to notions of identity and social politics that the interrelationships between artists and audiences are simultaneously the most enthralling and the most fraught.

There are evident tensions between artists' desires to narrate their own experiences (or determine the significance of their music) and audiences' capacity for subjective interpretation. Even as artists' active reframing of their careers and personas through retrospection impacts how we navigate their sprawling personal storyworlds, then, audiences are not restricted to following the paths of interpretation that are mapped out by artists and their teams of collaborators. For example, some reviewers found Bieber's claim of taking social responsibility on *Justice* less than convincing, seeing this as “a gesture best left unmade” (Magan 2021) and describing the album as demonstrating a “poor understanding of struggle [that] feels like little more than a marketing tool” (Solomon 2021).¹² While dismissals of Bieber's capacity to address social issues might reflect common views of mainstream pop music as unimportant and long-standing suspicions of socially conscious pop artists' motives (see Hansen 2022, p. 120), they also indicate a gap between Bieber's self-presentation and the reviewers' perceptions of him. In contrast, other reviewers of *Justice* circumvented Bieber's claim of taking social responsibility altogether to focus on how the album reflected his musical and personal growth (Lipshutz 2021; O'Connor 2021), which demonstrates attentiveness to one specific dimension of Bieber's

personal storyworld and disinterest in another. Surveying the comments sections of Bieber's YouTube videos or social media posts reveals similarly diverse responses to the album and associated material, further illustrating the flexibility with which audiences determine the significance of individual elements for their broader impressions of the persona (and how their impressions of the persona influence their opinions about these individual elements).

The dialectic tension between shapeshifting and layering identified by Elliott (2019, p. 20) is intrinsic to how personas appeal to audiences, proliferating opportunities for (dis)identification and (dis)connection. As Thon argues, audiences "routinely 'ignore' some aspects of narrative representations in order to intersubjectively construct the represented storyworlds" (2016, p. 61). This point holds a unique relevance for popular music culture. Indeed, audiences' ability to embrace or reject specific aspects of their many encounters with artists across multiple media and contexts is integral to how they draw up their own maps of artists' personal storyworlds. It is as pop personas emerge and evolve in the intersubjective spaces generated by the multiple points of contact between artists and audiences, then, that the significances of popular music's affective forces and social politics are negotiated and experienced in the most compelling ways.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article, I have explored the notion of an artist's personal storyworld as a useful point of entry for thinking through the transmedial processes by which audiences encounter, co-construct, and re-construct artists' personas over time and in relation to diverse cultural artifacts and expressive gestures. Seeking out new connections between perspectives from transmedial narratology and popular music studies holds potential to reveal novel possibilities for (re)considering how the dynamic relations between performative gestures and (inter)subjective interpretation inform perceptions of pop personas. Working from a definition of personas as a complex of ideas about "who an artist is", I have sought to shed some light on the multiplicity of potential meanings afforded by artists' diverse creative output and eventful lives and careers, on the one hand, and audiences' interpretive flexibility, on the other. The concept of the personal storyworld is useful in this regard because it alludes to how the multiplicity of symbols and signs that influence our perceptions of pop artists are grouped together within a single frame of reference (tenuous as this frame may be).

The evolving career of Justin Bieber provides opportunities for contemplating the retrospective dimensions of how pop personas are performed and understood. In the early 2020s, his self-presentation across various channels – songs, music videos, live performances, documentary clips, and more – resonated with his widely known personal and professional history. As Bieber's storyworld expanded with the release of *Justice* in 2021, his past became a resource for reframing and reinventing his persona – both for him and his collaborators and for audiences. Even as songs, music videos, and other material afforded diverse impressions of Bieber and alluded to a plurality of cultural and social meanings, some interpretive pathways were mapped out more clearly than others. Most notably, there was an emphasis on Bieber's personal growth and social responsibility. His self-reinvention garnered mixed responses, however, which points to the flexibility with which audiences interpret artists' music, statements, and actions. The diverse narratives surrounding pop personas are as easily rejected as they are accepted.

The lives and careers of present-day pop stars are widely documented. As such, vast and easily accessible collections of songs, music videos, live clips, artwork, interview statements, social media posts, and other material proliferate points of contact between artists and

audiences. An artist's personal storyworld is ever-expanding, comprising countless elements that can both support and contradict each other and which open onto complex historical, cultural, and social discourses. The rich and expansive storyworlds associated with pop artists simultaneously complicate the idea of an "authentic" persona and serve as resources for audiences' construction of their own multifaceted images of their favourite stars. These processes, I would argue, are integral to how we – listeners, critics, scholars – use popular music as a resource for narrating our own experiences and exploring our relationships to the world. The blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, art and reality, and the public and the personal make these explorations all the more enticing and contentious.

END NOTES

¹ For critical discussions about stardom, public personas, and imagined intimacy, see Marshall (2016) and Rojek (2016).

² See, for example, Prior (2018, pp. 86–91) for a critique of this idea.

³ Auslander (2021, pp. 95–97) provides a more detailed account of the dynamics between theatricality and authenticity in relation to musical personas. Like Auslander (ibid., p. 96), I apply theatricality as a descriptive term rather than as an analytical category.

⁴ See Hansen (2017) and Hawkins (2020) on personal narrativity in context of popular music.

⁵ The post is available here <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CLw1Raunz-z/>> (accessed 25 October, 2023).

⁶ Note that the post has over 40,000 comments and fans express a broad range of opinions and reactions. This illustrates the flexibility with which audiences respond to the same material, even if some common tendencies can be identified.

⁷ For one, musical changes related to instrumentation, style, tempo, or overall energy can drastically impact listeners' experience of a song (and, by extension, the song's impact on listeners' perceptions of the persona). Similarly, different performance contexts offer distinct conditions for artist-audience encounters and carry varied cultural associations. Both these points might seem self-evident, but they are seldom addressed in discussions about musical performance and personas.

⁸ A video of the performance is available here <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlppEPjJQWs>> (accessed 25 October, 2023).

⁹ Dibben (2009) discusses musical performance and emotional authenticity in more detail.

¹⁰ *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter* was directed by Michael D. Ratner and released on YouTube on 30 October, 2020. It detailed Bieber's life in quarantine following the global COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 and the recording of *Justice*. *Justin Bieber: Our World* was also directed by Ratner and released on Amazon Prime on 8 October, 2021. The film follows Bieber's preparations for his first solo concert in over three years. *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter* anticipated and promoted the *Justice* album, while *Justin Bieber: Our World* was released on the same day as *Justice: The Complete Edition* (an extended version of the album). The films follow a series of previous documentaries from Bieber, which illustrates a striking continuity in his use of behind-the-scenes documentaries to narrate his personal experiences and professional developments. See Bickford (2020, pp. 149–164) for a detailed discussion of how Bieber's concert film, *Never Say*

Never (2010), simultaneously bolstered his status as a child prodigy and couched his commercial success in comfortable family domesticity.

¹¹ See Hansen (2022, pp. 116–126) for a more detailed analysis of the song and music video.

¹² Similar criticisms abounded on online forums and discussion websites, such as Reddit, which contains several posts about the *Justice* album. Relevant threads are easily searchable on the Reddit website: <www.reddit.com> (accessed 30 October, 2023).

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