Vital Strategies

The application of hyperreality to online personas, and its value

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Track: Philosophy of Humanity and Culture

Word Count: 15328

Date of submission: 12-06-2023

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Introduction

The problem of online personas

What is the difference between a persona one adopts online, and the real person "behind" that persona? This question is becoming easier and easier to pose, and increasingly hard to answer. Due to rapid progress in the online sphere, telling real people apart from their online personas has become a confusing business. This might sound overblown, as intuitively, one might say we try to present our authentic selves in the online world. But the online space presents us with the option to not just distort or change how we present ourselves compared to 'reality', but also to craft an entirely separate online persona.

Some have mastered crafting an online persona. One of the most potent tools of this craft is irony. Irony as it developed in the online sphere has veered away from the common use of the term, and has developed layers of meaning on the internet. Statements and gestures of this type of irony present an impossible puzzle, because online irony veils the distinction between jokes and serious statements. Beyond just saying *x* and meaning *not x*, this use of irony blurs the lines between truth and falsity. Moreover, these personas make us question not just who is "behind" their mask, but if there is even someone behind it. Where does the persona end and the real person begin? Is everything they say meant to be understood within a spiralling field of irony, and if so, do they even believe anything at all? If not, which of the things they say *do* they mean?

The problem we are faced with in the online sphere is the confusion regarding the reality of online personas. This is a pressing problem especially because these personas make statements concerning controversial topics, specifically those of *moral* and *political* importance. What needs to be overcome in these cases is the problem of (online) irony, and deciphering whether or not an online persona is meant ironically, and what that means within the language of the internet. There is no clear split between a persona and a real person. Irony and other characteristics of the online sphere and its personas blur the distinction. This results in some people seemingly getting away with *morally problematic* statements, content and beliefs due to their 'ironic' guise. Furthermore, interactions such as *political engagement* are pushed away or made to seem meaningless, as it seems these personas live in their own world. To understand this we need to explore the blurred distinction between reality and fiction, or person and persona.

Firstly, I will seek to find this understanding by applying Jean Baudrillard's theory of the *hyperreal* to the problem. This theory will eschew the difference between real person and persona. This theoretical commitment explains the blurring of distinctions and 'accepts' it. To do this, it leaves behind the idea of a 'real person', as the *hyperreal* is a surface level where persona and real person are just as real or fake. Secondly, I will present the seeming problem with this understanding: it leaves no room for *moral and political* engagement with these personas. With Baudrillard's theory we achieve an *understanding* of online media personas, and clear much confusion regarding their reality, but we dismiss political or moral engagement with them. If there is no real person "behind" the persona, how can we lay blame? Or how can we value what they have to say politically? Does this understanding come at the cost of a loss of any *valuable* engagement? This leads me to my central research question: What is the *value* of understanding online personas as *hyperreal*? I will distinguish mainly between three types of value and types of engagement: moral, political and theoretical. Moral engagement can be considered valuable for laying blame and being able to judge personas and

their controversy, political engagement is valuable for assessing the seeming political motivations of personas and theoretical engagement is valuable for understanding the inner workings of the phenomenon of personas, and being able to engage with them through continued study. These three categories break down into two ways of engaging with the phenomenon of online personas. Moral and political engagement both engage from the 'outside' of personas, subjecting the phenomenon to their own pre-established rules such as existing moral judgement or political analysis. Theoretical engagement on the other hand engages from 'inside' personas, seeking to first understand the phenomenon using its own rules or characteristics and then finding a suitable theoretical framework that matches them. I will show that Baudrillard's theory is (1) a suitable framework to understand this phenomenon and (2) gives us a way to engage with online personas from 'inside' of the phenomenon despite lacking any way to engage from the 'outside' by projecting categories on it, laying blame, et cetera. Thus I will show that despite the seeming problem of lost political and moral engagement, this approach has value because it gives us a different way of theoretically engaging with the phenomenon.

Structure

To start, I introduce the problem of online media personas and explain it in more detail. More specifically, I will justify why we should view it as a problem in light of political and moral concerns. After this first characterisation and problematization, I will illustrate the morally and politically problematic sides of online media personas through two case studies. I will also shed more light on how I conceive of online media personas, and how they are distinct from other online users. This conception will explain their specific use of irony in the online sphere, and how it differs from other views on irony.

The first case study will pertain to the moral sphere. It concerns the comedian Sam Hyde, whose persona and subject matter is often judged as *morally* problematic. Despite these judgements, Hyde is also surrounded by online discourse that *questions* the existence of *any* moral or political message within his comedy. Hyde himself claims to be purely comedic, yet is also affiliated with alt-right movements and specifically chooses inflammatory topics. The second case will pertain to the political sphere. It concerns YouTuber and political commentator Gregory Guevara, whose persona 'Jreg' comments extensively on *politics* but is generally not taken seriously in this sphere because he presents himself as being both ironic and sincere at the same time. Furthermore, he mixes the private with the public and makes videos on deeply personal topics that are still not believed to be either fully sincere nor fully comedic. In both cases I will analyse their use of irony. I will do this because (online) irony is a connecting thread between their personas and others like them. I will also look at the different conflicting audience reactions to their online content and appearances, since they show that with these figures it is possible to debate their sincerity, truthfulness and very reality without coming to a conclusive answer.

In the second chapter I present an understanding of online personas. This understanding consists of the application of Jean Baudrillard's concept of the *hyperreal*. Firstly I will explain why I used Baudrillard's theory in particular, and justify why it is apt to apply it to the topic. Secondly I will explain Baudrillard's theoretical framework, and go into which theoretical commitments we need when we applying his theory to online personas specifically. Then I will explain the concept of hyperreality and apply it to a general understanding of online media personas. The third and final chapter comments on the preceding chapters by highlighting how the application of hyperreality

helps us to understand personas, but loses out on being able to *morally or politically* engage with them. This constitutes a first possible answer to the research question: the application has little value, since it allows for no valuable engagement. I reject this answer, and continue the analysis of personas through Baudrillard's theory. I conclude that through the analysis of personas, using the Baudrillardian concepts of *seduction* and *transparency* and the tension between them, we can keep the *explanatory* value of Baudrillard's theories and have valuable *theoretical engagement* with the topic of online personas. This theoretical engagement comes in the form of a shift in *what* we study with regard to personas (and similar truth-blurring phenomena). The object of study shifts from the personas themselves to the *tension* between seduction and transparency inside the them. I will argue that this approach is particularly valuable because other approaches such as those with a political or moral character take up a position external to the phenomenon that either misses, ignores or removes key aspects of online personas. Baudrillard's theory offers insights that understand the online persona as an online persona, and not as a manifestation of another concept, theory, movement, et cetera. With this more complete understanding of personas *as personas*, we might be more able to adequately react to their actions and controversies.

1 What is an online persona?

1.1 Personas come online

Firstly, I will make clear what I mean by an online *persona* by listing what characteristics they have, what they have in common with existing views on media and identity and what characteristics seem to not fit into some of the existing literature on the subject. To start, what is an online *persona* and what makes one so different from other internet users or figures like (online) celebrities? Furthermore, why is a distinction between these groups in particular necessary? These distinctions and specifications will help show why these *particular kinds* of online users pose problems for the distinction between truth and falsity and subsequent engagement. The connecting thread between all these characteristics and distinctions is the way they blur the line between reality and fiction for online *personas* specifically. The characteristics that online personas share, and what sets them apart from other online personalities is that they: (1) have an *Internet* origin and following, are (2) *not* anonymous and *not* purely on the internet, (3) make use of *particular* forms of irony and (4) seemingly have an *agenda*.

Internet origin

Online personas *originate* from the internet and mainly operate on the internet, they are not offline celebrities who migrated to an internet platform. Their digital 'literacy' is an important part of them that relates to their following and their use of irony. Not only the *persona's* online actions but the general *features* of the online sphere play an important role as well. It is harder to tell whether or not something is 'real' online when compared to offline. There are layers of separation between users, especially between users with celebrity or content creator status and 'regular' users. Think of video editing, scripts and the lack of *immediate* access to face-to-face communication. Each of these features mediates and changes interactions. Furthermore, users and creators are not always aware of these mediations or the extent of these mediations. Vlogging YouTubers for example, could be seen as aiming at direct connections between them and their fans. In showing their own living spaces, friends, family and day-to-day activities, they cultivate a seemingly intimate (and authentic) relationship to many of their viewers despite its overt mediation.

Beyond just interacting with the more famous echelon of online users, the online sphere also allows for anyone to dabble in the construction of new identities, and to experiment with said identities. A

key thinker on this topic is Sherry Turkle. Many of Turkle's (1997, p. 10) examples and claims about the nature of the online sphere apply to online personas as well. In her words, what we do in the online sphere amounts to "constructing identity in a culture of simulation." My research into online *personas* shares the focus on the internet with Turkle exactly because the internet is a space that is "on the threshold of the real and the virtual" where we are "inventing ourselves as we go along." In short: a space that allows for blurred boundaries, like those of truth and falsity.

On the internet, we can modify our existing identity, present certain parts, or invent a new one. Turkle (1996, p. 157) calls online spaces a "blurred genre" of things like collaborative writing, script writing and theatre. She emphasises the ability for online users to be the authors of their own story, as they write their own script and character(s). This ability can be seen as a very positive development in thinking about identity, as it gives users a lot of freedom to become who they wish to be. I would like to shift this focus, in light of online personas, to a more negative feature of online identity construction: *deception*. With the ability to play a character online, one also gains the ability to obscure this fact from others. On the internet, people can play a character, which can be the person they want to be. They can become who they play and both *are and are not* their character. This *ambiguity* can create confusion if it is unclear what their *intent* with the character is.

The questions of *intent and rules* are extremely important in determining whether or not we are dealing with an online *persona*, or another identity. All identities that are adopted on the internet blur the line between fake and real to an extent. Even when we strive for authenticity on an online platform, a perfect reflection of who we are will not be achieved. Think of photo and video editing, face filters, post captions and other choices to show or edit only certain parts of oneself. But in all these cases, there can still be the *intent* to be authentic. Whether or not it is believed or perceived this intent *can* be communicated despite mediation. Furthermore, online users can follow existing *genre-rules* pertaining to their online space which show other users the line between themselves and their character. Both this authentic intent and following of established rules are absent in an online persona. Through their digital 'literacy', online personas actively disregard a clear show of intent. Furthermore, online personas know the genre rules of their respective online spaces well, and play with those rules, subverting them. In videos for example, it is an unspoken rule that showing an unused greenscreen means that editing is turned off for this video, and this is intended to communicate authenticity. An online persona on the other hand, would appear in front of an unused greenscreen, but still behave erratically or in a comedic fashion. This blends rules for two different spheres such as comedy and behind-the-scenes, making interpretation difficult.

Up until now it seems that anyone could have or become an online *persona*. But there are a few distinctions to be made. Anyone can master the online sphere and its potential for identity construction in such a way that they obscure whether they are real or fake. But what most internet users do not have, is *fame*, especially fame combined with this blurring of reality. When I say fame here, I meant to refer mostly to the existence of a platform (such as an account or channel) and a following. This platform and following is important because it allows online users to have a big impact on real world events, this is my metric for fame in this case. But how does this type of fame blur distinctions between fake and real? Firstly, fame is another layer of separation. Internet celebrities are other internet users, but are also revered by their fans. Fame, combined with a platform where you can potentially interact more closely through direct messaging and live streaming chats, introduces an ambiguity in how intimately users interact with their online celebrity of choice. There are more layers of separation through the features of the online world, but also more venues for direct interaction. This can cultivate very complex "parasocial" relationships: one sided relationships between fan and celebrity which seem intimate but are not reciprocated (Abidin,

2018. p. 8). This entire effect is made more confusing for the fans of online personas. As online personas make it difficult to tell truth from falsity, being able to tell whether they are really invested in you as a fan becomes impossible as well. Moreover, this can create a gap between how authentic the fans perceive the persona to be and how a more general audience perceives them, adding to further confusion and competing narratives on their reality.

Another effect of *fame* is being known under one name, alias or character, which fixes your identity in a way, even online. In everyday online use, users can adopt multiple identities for multiple online spaces (Turkle 1997 p. 15). Online *personas,* in contrast, have a single persona that inhabits multiple spaces. Furthermore, they also inhabit the offline space *as their persona.* This sets them apart from a few different figures that inhabit both the online and offline space. They differ from celebrities and public figures, those recognisable from 'offline' media. These figures can inhabit the online sphere, but originate from the offline sphere and project their existing identity onto an online avatar. These public figures have fame, but also have an *authentic self* to fall back on. Online *personas* start with a blank slate on the internet, like many other users, and craft an identity that is not necessarily tied to their offline self. Furthermore, when online personas make appearances in the offline world, they are not returning to an authentic self, but continue to display their online behaviour. Online personas also differ from internet users labelled as *trolls*, those who originate from the internet, but are not famous as of yet. They use similar tactics of deception and truth-blurring and have a similar constructed identity to online personas, but trolls disappear quickly. Trolls have a similar way of distorting truth and falsity, but they do it from a position of anonymity and obscurity that is partly helped by them *not* being famous and never appearing openly in the offline sphere.

Not anonymous

As I mentioned in the previous section, online personas originate from the online sphere, but inhabit the offline world as well. Online persona*s* use their own face and name, but do not display their own authentic self like celebrities (try to) do. Celebrities might *exaggerate* their personality traits, but at their core they attempt to show one clear self that delineates between truth and falsity and follows rules to tell whether they are real or fake. Online *personas* operate differently. Despite being real persons who shows themselves (on camera, in posts, on their profile picture et cetera.) they do seem, in their face-to-face appearances, to play a character. This character can have a different name than they do, but either still incorporates their name, or is an alias. Their real name and face are known. This can already create confusion regarding their reality because this can blur the difference between their private and online life, if there is any. They share this trait somewhat with other content creators that I do not consider to have or be a persona.

For many online users, there exists this tension between their 'real' face and name and their online character. But online personas find themselves in a unique position both on- and offline. Other (especially famous) online users are questioned about this tension present in their videos, posts and other online actions. Most online users, when questioned about this will *intend* to show their authentic self. Think of behind-the-scenes videos, apology videos, vlogs, blogs, online diaries, direct messaging et cetera. Online celebrities can even shed their character completely, and achieve some amount of authenticity by clearly showing the dividing line between them and their character. They can, for example, state clearly that a part of their content is comedy, and another part is reality. Think of the division between a main YouTube channel and a second (or behind the scenes) channel, or a public and private Instagram account. In contrast, online *personas* make no such distinction, there is no intent to show an authentic self, there are no rules displayed to delineate between fake and real. Their blending of offline and online, private and public, makes it impossible for them to 'shed' their character.

Let me illustrate this by comparing two of these online 'shedding' moments attempted by online celebrities who play a character. The first is George "Joji" Miller, an ex-YouTuber who successfully shed his online identity and clearly delineates between his authentic self and his character. The second is one of the case studies of online personas: Gregory "jreg" Guevara, who shed his online identity seemingly unsuccessfully. Miller ended his career as the character "Filthy Frank", moving on to a music career where he fully acted as himself, going by his own name and definitively stating that his playing of the character of "Frank" was officially over. He gave personal reasons of fatigue and boredom with the character (Brotherton, 2021). Quite similarly, Guevara made a video candidly commenting on his own loneliness, with none of the ironic tone of his videos and political stunts. He states that this video was personally difficult for him, and even comments on his past use of irony (jREG. 2023, Februari 11). Despite this seeming genuine turn, and reactions of fans who were genuinely moved by his authentic display, Guevara has already set a precedent of ironic distance from reality, and he was subsequently questioned. One YouTube commenter had this to say: *"The idea that jreg will say some thing genuine and not some level of ironic is so strange to me, that even when I see him cry, I don't know if it is real".*

This is the difference between an online *persona* and an online *character*. George Miller had set the rules of engagement with his character clearly enough, and made distinctions between himself and his character. His character "Filthy Frank" talked, dressed and acted differently than him, despite sharing his face. The description of his YouTube channel even presented his intent and rules: "Filthy Frank is the embodiment of everything a person should not be" (Brotherton, 2021). In contrast, Jreg has set a precedent that confuses his audience, and instead of the heartfelt reaction that Miller got after leaving his character, Jreg got a mixed response of grief and confusion. This goes to show that a *persona* is not always 'fake', but rather a confusing mix of fake and real which leaves both options open. This leaves a lot to interpretation, and seemingly little up to the 'author' of the identity.

This comparison highlights another difference between online personas and other online identities, such as that of Miller's "Filthy Frank". A person creating an online identity has the choice to go as far away from a "real self" as one chooses because of the anonymity of the internet. (Turkle 1997. p. 12) Because of anonymity, a user can disregard parts of their real self while enhancing others. This anonymity comes with a lot of choices on how to frame one's "self". With an online *character* that shares your face, complications already appear. George Miller, despite his efforts to clearly delineate between his real self and his character, is still somewhat "haunted" by what he has created (Brotherton, 2021). Exactly because his fans associate his face with his character, there is a slight blurring of the lines between himself and "Frank". But this goes a step further with online *personas.* For them, there is no 'stepping out' of the real world into the virtual, as they become intertwined by their use of their real name, face, voice, and parts of their personal life. In comparison, "Filthy Frank" is a far cry from George Miller's actual demeanour, opinions, clothes and voice. But when Greg Guevara makes a similarly heartfelt turn toward his "real" self, it is met with (partial) suspicion, since it is unclear when he steps in and out of character. Since the 'character' of "jreg" is intertwined with what others perceive to be the 'real' Gregory Guevara.

In both of these cases, the features of the online world subvert traditional identity conceptions. Authenticity is put into question and challenged in the online sphere, where one can play and "be" a fluctuating character instead of one continuous subject with reference to the real world. This spawns many contradictions. Online personas play with these contradictions, specifically those of fake and real. Where they differ from the users Turkle (1996. p. 157) focuses on is in their explicit blending of offline and online. When one shows their face and uses their given name online, it is most often presumed that this person steps out of any online identity and projects their real life identity onto

the screen. Non-anonymity in this case implies authenticity, but this is not so with online *personas*. Miller adopted signs and rules that clued the audience into the separation between him and "Filthy Frank", he always wore the same glasses and blouse, and spoke in the same gravelly voice. In many of his videos, Guevara talks with what could be called ironic exaggeration in his voice, but this a far subtler distinction than the sort of 'costume' that Miller wore. The difference here, lies in *blending* versus clearly *delineating.* Turkle (1996, p. 158) focuses on the exploration of new identities, to become what you are not. But this requires reference (in your own experience) to your more continuous self, that you now distance yourself from. With online *personas*, the audience is observing from the outside, and has been given no criteria to judge the persona's reality because online personas distort the reference to this continuous self that others often show or explicate. In some of Turkle's examples, she talks to the person who plays the characters she describes. They explicate their *intent* when playing the character, exactly like Miller did in the description of his channel. This is a clear line of separation, despite what Turkle says about blurred lines. This separation is missing in online *personas.*

Irony

An online *persona* like "jreg" uses a particular form of irony which explicitly blends real and fake, and blurs the line between the two. This form of irony is also distinct from, but easy to mistake for, other forms of irony. Irony itself is already complicated, but will appear simple by comparison to those who experience the type of irony that online *personas* employ. Both "jreg" and the other case study I employ; Sam Hyde, make their use of irony explicit. But their description of *in what way* they are being ironic varies and does not coincide with many historical conceptions of the term nor even an (admittedly vague) common-sense idea about irony. Hyde claims his comedy is meant to simply not to be taken seriously, and that it is ironic (Abramovitch, 2016). Similarly, Guevara, in one of his recent political stunts of running for mayor, has claimed his content is post-ironic, by which he means that it offers authentic insights through presenting itself ironically (Mckenzie, 2022).

There are two clear complications here. Firstly, reactions from others are still left confused even after supposedly authentic or completely ironic statements. Think back to my example of Guevara's attempt at authenticity, and the comments that questioned this. Similarly, in the interview in which Hyde claimed his comedy is purely ironic the interviewer openly questions him about what motivates him. The topic concerned a stand-up comedy set where Hyde was seen as so offensive that people started to leave. Hyde answers that he just tries to make people laugh. But at the same time, he says that he wanted to make the audience leave because he simply does not like them. He claims that his show is not a vehicle for hate, while being motivated by his disliking of people (Abramovitch, 2016). This is just as contradictory and ambiguous as Guevara's attempts at authenticity.

Since both figures have not given clear guidelines for when they are serious or not, their own statements on their authenticity must be taken with a grain of salt. The way they obfuscate their intent sabotages attempts to retroactively say what is real or fake, serious or joking, and authentic or inauthentic. Since they cannot adequately characterise themselves without inviting intense scrutiny, I will venture to characterise their use of irony with different terms than their self-admitted ones. I will characterise these two, and by extension any online *persona*, not as ironic or post-ironic but as using postmodern irony or meta-irony. What I mean by meta-irony is the use of irony in such a way that truth or falsity become entirely impossible to tell apart. I will explain this version of irony by framing it within some broad conceptions of irony, these will be generalizations but they will serve merely to highlight how online personas use irony. I conceive of irony as having a few layers, which go further and further into more confusing territory until we get to Meta-irony. These layers are:

-(1) Sincerity. No presence of irony, one means what one says.

-(2) Irony. One says what one exactly does not mean. To various ends.

-(3) Post-Irony. One says what one means, but uses the features of irony while being sincere.

-(4) Meta-Irony. It is unclear what one means due to the mix of features of irony, post-irony and sincerity.

In all these cases the focus is on the use of irony, mainly in speaking or writing. Each use of irony has a different relationship to truth and lies. To start, speaking ironically points to reality in a roundabout way. Forms of irony like Socratic irony roughly follow this form, where you pretend to agree with your fellow speaker, to rhetorically cut their argument down later on (Williams, 2003). You indulge in untruth so to say, to point out a truth. The usage of irony consists of saying you mean *x*, but saying it in such a way that implies (by tone and context) that you really mean *not-x*. Irony is like a mask of lies that points to the fact there is something truthful underneath the mask. *Post-irony*, by comparison, is much the same, but takes an even more roundabout path. Its formula is like irony but flipped on its head. One says what one means immediately, instead of stating its opposite. When speaking post-ironically, you say x and mean x. But through your tone and the context you are in, you imply the use of irony, without really being ironic. Post-irony is like a truthful smile, that looks so sincere it starts to seem untrue. Finally, *Meta-Irony* masks nothing, as there is seemingly no intent, truthful or untruthful, underneath what is said or done. Meta-irony is hard to describe through a formula, as it has lost its relationship to truth and lies. There is no real formula to either saying or meaning x or not-x, as this divide is absent in meta-irony. Those who witness meta-irony, are confused not by its tricky relationship to truth but by the lack of this relationship. There is a clear air of irony around the meta-ironic, but it becomes impossible to pinpoint what truth or lie it is aiming at, if any at all. Meta-irony is irony that has lost all reference except to itself, it has no relationship to truth or lies. It coincides with what Jean Baudrillard called the fourth phase of the sign, pure self-reference (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). I will go on to show this in more detail the second chapter.

I focus on all of these phases since both of the personas I use as case studies have told people what their particular brand of irony is supposed to be. As I have stated previously, their testimony on these brands of irony is highly suspicious. It is clear that online *personas* like Sam Hyde and Gregory Guevara are not being blatantly sincere, they employ comedy and satire after all. Hyde claims his comedy is ironic, so put simply: he says x and means not-x, or he is disguising a truth with a lie to get an audience to focus on the hidden truth. Similarly, Guevara has made his supposed post-ironic stance very clear in his mayoral campaign. So his actions and statements are meant to be taken as sincere at face value or having a core of truth, and he is simply using an ironic façade to “sell” his sincerity. So Hyde is definitively meant to be taken non-seriously, while Guevara is meant to be taken seriously. But I have already shown why this does not work. Audience and media reactions to their stunts and skits clearly indicate that they are often perceived as the opposite of how they want to be seen.

When Sam Hyde wore KKK-robes on the street, and heckled LGBTQ+ people publicly, he claimed it was ironic comedy, but he received an enormous amount of backlash and the show in which he did these stunts was cancelled by the studio in record time (Weigel, 2016). Clear intentions and rules of engagement are missing here, as I showed when comparing George Miller and Gregory Guevara. Hyde is a similar case. Guevara attempted to show clear *intentions*, and this only half-worked. Hyde attempted to demonstrate clear *rules*, and this was not taken seriously. In the same vein, when Guevara ran for mayor, this was seen as *ironic*, despite his claims to stand for something and to be post-ironic (i.e. secretly sincere) (Mckenzie, 2022). So both online *personas* sometimes achieve the exact opposite of what they claim to do through their irony. Hyde claims to wear KKK-robes ironically

and comedically, to simply make people laugh, but the majority reaction is simply to take it seriously. Guevara claims to be sincere about his investment in politics, but the majority reaction is simply to see it as a joke.

The majority reaction by audiences, and the media reception of these stunts disregards a large part of these online personas' actions and intentions. That said, some people have engaged with their content, since online *personas* do have a *following.* And it could be said that their following is a bit more *in the know* than 'normal bystanders'. They have lingo or inside jokes that easily fly over others' heads. Sam Hyde's fanbase employs a common inside joke where they attribute a recent mass shooting to him, and circulate false information using his name and picture to designate the shooter. This is also speculated to be orchestrated by Hyde himself (Bromwich, 2017). In the same vein, Guevara's fans banded together with him during his campaign and crashed a mayoral debate, where they raved about building a wall around Ottawa (jREG. 2022, Oct 22). In these cases the fans might think they are 'in the know', but I would much rather say they are closer to the persona, but there is no 'looking under the mask'. In each of these cases of aiding an online persona the fans interact with them, but play by the persona's unclear and contradictory rules for the time being. The question still remains whether or not the *persona*s are sincere, ironic or post-ironic in these provocations. Furthermore, the personas might only let fans 'in on it' since these fans simply want entertainment, and not answers. As I have shown previously, the fan-celebrity relationship and resultant (one-sided) intimacy can further blur the lines between perceived authenticity and real authenticity.

Fans might get 'insider knowledge' when they aid these personas, but personas themselves seem far more hostile to outside attempts to get answers. The YouTuber Ian Carter aka "IdubbbzTV" has attempted to candidly interview Sam Hyde and seemingly *failed* at the interview. In the interview Hyde presents himself erratically and towards the end Carter comments that it seems he is playing a game of confusing people, where *only Hyde* knows when he is being genuine (iDubbbzTV 2022, Februari 2. 1:04:00). The comments Ian Carter made on Hyde playing a game of sorts are very apt to describe his methods. This game alienated Carter, and has a similar effect on viewers of Hyde. Guevara's version of this game can be seen in his constantly shifting political allegiance. These are meta-ironic games that chooses detachment from reality and a commitment to an inconsistent character over authentic engagement with real issues. Switching political opinion on a dime is not something an authentic person would likely do, but an online persona could.

Seeming agenda

The examples I have employed thus far not only highlight the blurred reality of online personas, but also the specific content of two personas I have taken as case studies. So far I have used them to illustrate that online personas are not merely hypothetical. I will show that the specific content of these case studies poses a real problem for the moral and political sphere. Both Hyde and Guevara make moral and political engagement with their content very difficult, due to the absence of clear intent and rules. This would be harmless, where it not for the *content* of their platforms. As all the previous examples show, both personas engage heavily with political themes and *seemingly* take stances. This content, when combined with their methods, sets them apart from 'harmless' entertainers, and even parody or satire. Barring parody or satire that is unclear due to problems of skill or execution, most entertainment that has something political to say does make its intent clear. And if it does not, it is often criticized for being unclear. But especially in Hyde's case, he does not make his intent clear, yet criticism is also made difficult.

Take for example, the controversy that surrounded another YouTuber and internet celebrity: Felix "PewDiePie" Kjellberg. He publicly apologised after saying the n-word during one of his livestreams. By contrast, Hyde, who has engaged in similarly offensive acts, does not apologise but instead labels

himself ironic and comedic, and is sometimes left off the hook for this despite seemingly clear political affiliations. In contrast, Kjellberg was sharply questioned on his political affiliations both before and after he said this slur (Romano, 2017). Kjellberg's affiliations were actually more unclear than Hyde's but due the effects of being an online persona, Hyde's sincerity is always put to question even when engaging in morally reprehensible acts or voicing his political opinions. Hyde is in open support of Donald Trump and the alt-right through his actions and content. Hyde has reportedly donated 5000 dollars to help in the legal defence of a neo-Nazi blogger, seemingly confirming his allyship with alt-right movements (Pearce, 2017). Yet online, similarly to the comments that questioned Guevara's sincerity, Hyde is just seen as comedic. Similarly, Hyde's political affiliations (if any) are openly discussed by online users. Even his seeming affiliation with neo-Nazi's is put to question online (dj_daly. 2022).

The online sphere gives people space to act out their (morally) questionable desires and to voice controversial opinions (Turkle, S. 1996. p. 157). This is usually unproblematic, because an 'unmasking' can occur. A real person can be held accountable for what they said or did, as Kjellberg was. But as I showed in the previous section, there are key differences in how people engage with a figure like Kjellberg and a persona like Sam Hyde. Kjellberg was held accountable because he linked his actions inside his content (saying a slur) back to his own person. In his case "PewDiePie" linked back to Felix Kjellberg, so Kjellberg was held responsible for actions during his stream as "PewDiePie". In contrast to Kjellberg, there is a lingering debate as to the reality of Sam Hyde and his moral and political beliefs despite the appearance of wrongdoing. This shows the difference between having beliefs that are taken seriously, having an agenda or political affiliation and having a *seeming* agenda. Hyde has only a seeming agenda because it is unclear whether or not anything he says is reflecting the beliefs of a real person at all.

1.2 Personas come undone

The characteristics of online personas that I have found make moral and political engagement difficult but not impossible. As I have shown, it might be difficult to judge the reality of personas, but people both online and offline still debate and make tentative judgements. What is more important for my research, is the particular *value* these types of engagement might have. The main problem with these types of engagement is that they disregard key aspects of online personas by subjecting them to categories and rules outside of them, and it would be valuable for a full understanding of personas to react to and analyse them on the basis of all their traits. If we disregard certain parts of personas, then the role those parts play will be overlooked, possibly playing into subpar engagement with them or misunderstanding their already vague goals and methods. My description of online personas through the work of Turkle has some gaps of understanding that moral and political approaches cannot fill. Firstly, online personas have *unclear intent* and *play with the (genre) rules* of engagement for their character and virtual space, instead of displaying attempts at clear communication. Either authentic communication (staying within the rules of engagement) or ironic/comedic communication are disregarded because moral and political engagement requires us to categorise people and their various appearances as either entirely ironic or entirely sincere, with no room for a mix of the two. These types of engagement rest on knowing whether or not someone is being truthful. The blameworthiness of a controversial statement for example, is largely determined by it being judged as entirely authentic or not.

Secondly, personas *lack* an authentic self to fall back on, or they *mix* an authentic self and a character. There is a blurred line between the online and offline. They are *non-anonymous* yet not perceived as authentic. For political or moral action to be taken, a real person needs to be discerned and linked back to online actions. As in the comparison between Felix Kjellberg and Sam Hyde, to

protest the actions of someone online, we need to first establish the real link between their online and offline self. This link can be established in the case of Hyde, but this misses the fact that his persona is a mix of offline and online without clear separation. Any separation we do make would be artificial, and based on offline and online figures such as celebrities, trolls and anonymous users that substantially differ from online personas. Thirdly, online personas make *implicit* use of what I have dubbed *meta-irony*. Their actual use of irony differs from their self-described use of it. We could agree with online personas' self-described uses of irony and what they supposedly refer to, but this misses the way their irony specifically evades references to anything but themselves. Alternatively we could use the categories of authentic and ironic on a case by case basis but this too would be to reduce the paradoxical actions and motivations of personas to one category or the other, leaving behind an ironic or authentic part of them, and the paradoxical part of them that is potentially both or neither.

Lastly, online personas seem to have a *political agenda* or interest, but their methods make both negative and positive engagement difficult. Ascribing existing political perspectives and beliefs to the two case studies would be inaccurate, as their political engagement differs from other online and offline figures. To apply existing political categories to them would miss that both case studies comment on and play with the rules of engaging with politics. Guevara makes use of a shifting political perspective, and Hyde seems to be playing at both being an ally of alt-right movements and making comedy about said movements. In the following chapter I will attempt to fill in these gaps of understanding differently. I will explain the characteristics of online personas through the work of Jean Baudrillard and his idea of the *hyperreal.* By doing this I will not project outside categories onto personas for the sake of political or moral engagement, nor reduce any of their characteristics to something else entirely. Instead I will accommodate the various characteristics by keeping them intact and expanding on them by showing how Baudrillard's theory explains these characteristics without compromising on the ways they blur reality, truth and meaning.

2 Online Personas as Hyperreal

2.1 What is hyperreality?

The next step in assessing online personas is filling the gaps of understanding that set them apart from other online users. What is needed are concepts that fit the *specific* characteristics of online personas. I will argue that Jean Baudrillard's idea of the *hyperreal* is one such concept. Furthermore, online personas have many characteristics that fit into Baudrillard's concepts concerning blurred reality. I will show that Baudrillard's theory does not reject or alter any previous characteristic, but rather expands on them and explains them. Firstly, Baudrillard's concept of the *hyperreal* concerns the blurred line between fake and real, which seems apt when talking about figures who blur this line. They inhabit the internet, which itself is a space that makes authenticity more difficult to exhibit. This space is a space of *simulation,* as Turkle (1997, p. 10) describes, one that holds virtual or simulated versions of real things such as "virtual sex and cyberspace marriage" and "computer psychotherapists". Simulation is the core concept at work in much of Baudrillard's work. Furthermore, online *personas* lack an authentic self to fall back on, they are a mask with nothing behind it, which fits into Baudrillard's characterization of the *hyperreal* as a *surface* with nothing underneath. Lastly, their use of meta-irony is purely *self-referential*, which is what Baudrillard ascribes to the *fourth phase of the sign*, or similarly; a *third-order simulacrum*. These concepts are apt because they fit into the understanding of online *personas* so far. Furthermore, in the preceding chapter I have agreed with Sherry Turkle concerning the features of online communication, and she similarly uses the works of French postmodernists like Baudrillard to describe these features (Turkle,

1997, p. 15).

The main concepts to apply from Baudrillard's work are: *hyperreality*, *simulation* and the *order of simulacra*. The first to gain an understanding of the blurred truth of *online personas*, the second and third to explain the theoretical background to this concept. Put simply: *Hyperreality* is more real than real (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 27). *Simulation* is the production of something unreal, but in doing so, makes telling reality impossible. Unlike with lying, or irony, simulation does not highlight the truth through untruth, but makes it impossible to tell what truth is (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 3). These two states are possible when the sign has passed into its fourth phase: a sign with no relation to reality whatsoever, existing in *self-referentiality* (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). What is needed for the understanding of online personas as hyperreal, is an understanding of what makes *hyperreality possible*. What makes it possible is the state of reality, value, reference and meaning that Baudrillard calls *simulation.*

Simulation is the current point in a transformation of meaning and reality which Baudrillard maps out in several of his works. The motive for these transformations is the control of objects, and the "project of universal control and hegemony" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 73). Through these changes, we move through copying, to production, and eventually to simulation (Lepers, 2009, p. 67). Simulation then transforms reality into hyperreality, one outcome of which is the possibility of online personas. The move to production is linked to big social changes, mainly the rise of the middle-class citizen and modernity (Lepers, 2009, p. 53). What characterises this citizen is putting everything in productive terms, not just working, but producing everything social, even down to 'realising' or producing humans (Lepers, 2009, p. 54). Not just the creation of objects, but also of subjects, gains a different character based on social changes (Lepers, 2009, p. 55). To show these changes, and how they affect reality, meaning, value and reference, Baudrillard maps out the phases that the image (or sign) goes through, and the phases the simulacrum (or copy) goes through. I will first show these phases, and then highlight their significance to simulation and hyperreality. These are Baudrillard's (1994, p. 6) "successive phases of the image:"

(1) The image "is a reflection of a profound reality"
(2) The image "masks and denatures a profound reality"
(3) The image "masks the absence of a profound reality"
(4) The image "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."

Additionally, Baudrillard (2017, p. 71) lists "three orders of simulacra" which are "running parallel to the successive mutations of the law of value since the Renaissance." These three orders are the following:

(1) The Counterfeit "is the dominant schema of the 'classical' period, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution"
(2) Production "is the dominant schema in the industrial era"
(3) Simulation "is the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase"

The four stages of the image concern what happens to reality and meaning through social changes, the orders of simulacrum concern what happens to value and reference. The first order simulacrum is the counterfeit, or the fake. This fake masks reality, but clearly makes reference to it (coinciding with the second phase of the image). Faking reality retroactively creates the original, because when

copies emerge, one can look at what the copy copied to see an original (Lepers, 2009, p. 129). Counterfeiting belongs to the social changes following the Renaissance, the changes of a rigid caste society to a class society with upward mobility. This upward mobility was made possible by people counterfeiting coins to fake their wealth, and dressing above their station through copying noble garb (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 71-72). The second order simulacrum is that of production, which comes with the social and technological changes of the industrial revolution. Production differs from counterfeiting, as within production the counterfeit's artful and deceptive copying of an object is now made to serve mechanical efficiency. Production does not *copy* an original, but rather *creates* an object regardless of any original (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 75). Production masks the absence of a profound reality, since there is no longer an original. Here we start seeing *copies of copies*, since in the industrial era it becomes possible to *mass produce* objects. With mass production, objects become equivalent to each other because it is impossible to compare them to one original from which they are all derived, rather they can only be compared to each other instance (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 74). Baudrillard illustrates the movement from counterfeiting to mass production with a comparison between the automaton (or the puppet) and the robot: "The automaton plays the man of the court, the socialite […] As for the robot, as its name implies, it works". There is a change in the *relation of reference* to the created *object* which partly acts like a human subject, and the *subject* themselves: "The automaton is the *analogon* of man and remains responsive to him. […] The machine is the *equivalent* of man, appropriating him to itself as an equal in the unity of the functional process" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 74). The puppet, used in Renaissance stage-plays, refers to the *original* human subject because it is a purposefully exaggerated imitation of a human. The machine is no exaggerated imitation but a recreation of the exact labour a human can do. In the first case there is a delineated difference, but in the second there is none. In practice, a stage player and puppet play different roles, but a factory worker and machine perform the exact same one. This directly affects how humans, or subjects, view themselves. The subject itself can become producible, which is further highlighted by the next phase.

The third order is simulation, which has no relation to reality whatsoever. Simulation is purely self-referential, not even related to how it is produced, since any production is already preceded by a model (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 77). Baudrillard (1994, p. 100) shows that in our current (digital) age: "There is a precession of reproduction over production, a precession of the genetic model over all possible bodies." An example of such a model, in line with the relation of subjects to simulacra, is the online profile. One has to navigate social media according to models of what persons would or should say online, and one is bid to choose specific photos, upload them in a certain way, add captions and use certain language. The online profile, with the avatar, online status, posts, search-history et cetera, is a model of what persons should look like online. This model *precedes* personhood, since one only gains personhood in the online sphere when following it. Think of navigating social media and being messaged by an account with a name that is just jumbled letters and numbers, no profile picture, no profile description, and no posts. A common thought here (at least to those who are digitally 'literate') is that this might be a bot or scammer. Suspicion arises about the reality of the person "behind" the profile if their profile does not follow the model that digital media prescribe. Here there is no reference to a person, but to the pre-generated model of a person. One retroactively gains the status of personhood when this is verified through following the model of an online profile. A further example is that of brands. When wearing a T-shirt of a famous brand, one really wears the *brand itself*, not the t-shirt. Since all one references about it is what

brand it is, instead of an original (as with the counterfeit) or a mechanical process (as with production) (Lepers, 2009, p. 131). This does not mean however, that to Baudrillard, nothing exists in the *physical* sense. But in the realm of simulation, things have ceased to exist in the *metaphysical sense*. Objects and people have ceased to be 'held up' by metaphysical assumptions surrounding their 'reality'. The meaning of things has been fundamentally changed (Lepers, 2009, p. 123). Objects still exist, nothing has become unreal, but we can only refer to something using its *own logic*, its own model: this is pure *self-reference.*

According to Baudrillard we have moved from copies which highlighted an original, to production which made only equivalent products without an original, to simulation which precedes from and can only reference a model. Simulation has a structure to which I eluded at the start of this chapter: the production of something which is seemingly unreal, but in doing so, makes telling reality impossible. A useful example for this structure, similar to the example of the online profile, is pornography. To Baudrillard, there are not just "sexual models of fulfilment" (i.e.; what one does to really be sexually gratified, similar to what one does to be an online user) but there is also "sexuality itself as a model" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 135). This model generates instances of 'real' sexuality. This is present in the *imitation* of pornography during sex. Pornography stages sex in detail, with closeups and exaggerations, and presents this as sex at its *most real*, despite being overtly designed. What happens when someone imitates pornography during 'real' intercourse, is the copying of a copy. One might think they are doing 'the real thing' when applying what they learned through supposedly extremely realistic porn, but what really happens here is the constitution of 'real' sexuality by virtue of following a model of it. Think also of the possibility of one's first exposure to sexuality being pornography. The question remains whether this shows us sexuality at its most real. Baudrillard would rather say that it shows us sexuality at its most *hyperreal*: exaggerated and planned to the finest detail, more real than real (Lepers, 2009, p. 135).

It is possible to simulate anything and everything, and it is the possibility of simulation which is key. Everything is preceded by models, and like pornography and the model of sexuality, other phenomena can also be simulated. And because anything can be simulated, preceding from a model instead of some 'natural' reference point or an original, we cannot consider anything to be either true or false. In the imitation of porn: where is the 'true' sexuality? A simualted phenomenon like sexuality appears 'as it is', there is no truth to uncover inside it after simulation. It is the *surface*, upon which both fake and real are the same. In *hyperreality*, we can only take things at face value. There is no depth (like an original object, or a mechanical process) which tells us one instance is true or false, copied or original, since every copy is already based upon another copy. This does not mean that the aforementioned phenomena like online identity, sexuality or products are now just imaginary, since imagining is exactly what the counterfeiter does. If you imagine that something is real, you know very well that it is not. But the imitator of pornography does not play at sexuality, he does it. The online user does not play at a personality, she has one. And the wearer of a brand shirt does not play ownership of a brand-item, he has one. The loss of a reference to reality does not put us into a fantasy world, rather it makes everything able to be real and not real, instead of everything being unreal (Baudrillard, J, 2008, p. 29). This is also why this state of simulation and hyperreality is self-referential. If there is no real or unreal version to compare something to, it can only be compared to itself. Since there is the possibility of simulation, reality and hyperreality *coincide* today. Hyperreality is not a particular form that happens in select instances, but a general condition (Lepers, 2009, p. 129).

2.2 Personas are hyperreal

Online personas are an example of this general condition of simulation and its possibilities. Personas construct a *deceptive* or *ambiguous* identity. With the help of Baudrillard's theory, we can say that they *simulate* identity, because it is unclear whether or not they are a real or fake person. Their exploration of identity very *overtly shows* the principle of simulation in action, as they have no intentions to follow rules that intend to show reference to something other than themselves. Their identity does not of course, highlight their irreality, but simply illustrates the possibility of constructing a fake identity. Think of meeting someone online using a common first name as their screen name, and they tell you; "I could be using my real name you know." At first, it seemed as though they were sincere in using their own first name as their screen name. But then they say this, and they do not immediately say "I am not using my own name as my screen name" but they also hint at the possibility of this name not being their real name. Both options are hinted at, but none are confirmed nor denied. In the same vein, personas play with the rules of online and offline engagement. Online they present themselves using their real name and face, yet they employ a jarring distance from reality through the use of confusingly ironic speech. They are both anonymous and completely visible on the internet and offline, as they appear 'as themselves' and 'as a character' at the same time, thus rendering both options for classifying their public identity unusable. They can only be seen as a persona, neither a fake nor a real person entirely.

Since it is impossible to see them as anonymous or visible, authentic or inauthentic, we are left with calling them *hyperreal*: more real than real. Baudrillard (2008, p. 27) expands this notion to any term that has "absorbed all the energy of its opposite". Not just the more real than real falls under hyperreality, but also something like "the truer than true, and the more beautiful than beautiful." Online personas are *more anonymous than the anonymous*, as they can appear using their own face and name yet be more unknowable than an invisible internet troll. They are more *authentic than authentic* people, since we have only their actions to judge them on and no further background or interpretation. This surface-level interaction is also hyperreality; being a surface without any depth. With many people we perceive the possibility to go into the 'depths' of their identity. When meeting someone online we know they could use a fake name, profile picture et cetera. We are already confronted with the possibility of lying (Turkle, 1997, p. 12). What we first experience is the surface of their identity, but when someone says "my screen name isn't my real name, my real name is Steven" we tend to believe them and think we have become more familiar with who this user really is because they refer to their real life and body instead of their online avatar (Turkle, 1997, p. 14). This goes especially for meeting people face to face after online interactions. The online space grants you the ability to assume a different identity, look and way of communicating (Turkle, 1997, p. 12). So showing one's own face and communicating without an online medium can be jarring when compared to online interaction. This is not so for online *personas*, as previously mentioned they appear 'offline' often, yet are still 'in character'. They *confront* us not with the possibility of lying, but with the possibility of simulation. If they lied, it would be easy to tell. What sets them further apart from the average user who can lie about identity is their celebrity status, as it allows them to present a certain (exaggerated) identity in their content that matches up with their 'offline' appearance. So there is no way to say you meet the 'real' person when seeing them outside of a video or social media post. What you have to go on are only their *surface level* actions, since there is no way into their depths. This impossibility, be it from a guarded stance surrounding their private life, being constantly in character or a blending private and public, makes us question the very existence of

depth to their identity. This leaves us with pure *self-referentiality*. We can go to their videos, posts, interviews et cetera to try and find out who they really are, but we are judging them by their own standards, not any from the outside. This stands in contrast to other celebrities, who are simulated as well but try actively to seem authentic. Other celebrities appear on talk shows and discuss their private life, while personas can appear on talk shows and in public but still baffle other people as to their authenticity (VCalla Productions. 2022, September 5). This all seems to stem from their particular use of irony, a use which fits the fourth phase of the sign, and the third-order simulacrum. Their use of meta-irony refers to nothing but itself, despite the personas' claims that they refer to some sort of authentic core.

3 The tension in personas

3.1 Personas are fascinating

So far I have applied hyperreality, simulation and self-referentiality to online personas generally, and to the two case studies. But if there is the possibility of simulation, then anything can be simulated. Simulation does not just appear in small instances like those of the online personas, or even just *some* of their actions: it is a general possibility. If we apply Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and hyperreality to personas, and understand them from 'the inside' then we cannot at the same time apply standards from a non-simulated sphere to their simulated identities. Understanding the online persona *as online persona* requires analysing them using their own logic, which is a logic of simulation which eschews categories like true, false, real and fake. Now that I have established that online personas can be accurately *understood* using Baudrillardian concepts of simulation and self-reference, I will show that his theory also offers ways of *engaging* with them. As I introduced at the start of my research, this theoretical engagement shifts *what* we study with regard to personas. The object of study shifts from the personas themselves to the *tension* between the concepts of *transparency and seduction*, which are two opposed forces which both characterise online personas. First I will briefly introduce these two concepts, then I will explain why it is the analysis of their *tension* that offers theoretical engagement, and in the following section I will show a full analysis which starts with online personas instead of these categories.

Transparency concerns overtly showing how simulation works, instead of keeping its possibility implicit or unknown (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 49). In some instances, personas *overtly show* us the general possibility of things to be simulated. This is illustrated by the difference between the online celebrity and the online persona. Both are subject to simulation and pure self-reference, but the celebrity still *intends* to reference an authentic personality. The celebrity does not show us that simulation is possible but rather wants to keep trying to reference something other than itself. On the other hand, the persona *shows* us that all identity can be simulated by purely referencing itself. By making it clear that we cannot judge the persona with anything other than its own logic, it shows us simulation in action. The celebrity, for example, makes it possible for us to look to their personal life, something *outside* their celebrity appearances, to judge or analyse these appearances. The online persona blends personal and private from the start, making it impossible to refer to their private life to explain public appearance, as they seem to have both but also neither. Whereas transparency deals with overtness, *seduction* fits more with the confusion regarding personas. The characteristic unclear or *seeming agenda* of personas shows us what seduction consists of.

Seduction is an underlying *secretive* motive or force which is antagonistic **(**Baudrillard, 2008, p. 99).

Seduction present in personas is illustrated by the difference between the troll and the online persona. The internet troll uses anonymity and secrecy to achieve a goal in online communication, be it entertainment or some controversial political aim. The persona appears just as secretive, but this extends even to their agenda itself. Trolls might be anonymous, and use similar confusing tactics to the persona, but in the end they directly aim at something. Goals seems to be absent in online personas, but at the same time there is the ongoing suspicion that they are working towards something, especially given their brushes with controversy. This is present in the speculation surrounding both Sam Hyde and Gregory Guevara concerning their 'true' political affiliations and intentions, and it is the key to seduction: a secretive underlying force that seems to have some goal that we do not quite understand. Both Guevara and Hyde antagonise people politically, Guevara with a post-ironic mayoral campaign and Hyde with inflammatory content on the edge of comedy.

Although both concepts each fit into the understanding of personas so far, it is key to state beforehand that understanding online personas purely along the lines of transparency or seduction does not work for theoretical engagement with them. Understanding personas purely from the concept of seduction leads us to no engagement, since maybe even the persona does not fully grasp the deeper goal of their actions. This can be seen in the case studies, as both Guevara and Hyde employ different descriptions of their use of irony and its aims, and often have the opposite effect of what they claim to want to accomplish. Furthermore, if this seductive side of them is inherently mysterious, then following my established method, we need to *not* strip personas of this characteristic, which means they will remain fundamentally unknowable. If secrecy is part of them, then it needs to be respected, but secrecy makes especially theoretical engagement difficult since we want to engage by getting to *know* their inner workings. On the other hand, understanding personas through the concept of transparency also hampers theoretical engagement, because after all workings of simulation are uncovered by the personas themselves, we are left with little more to study, which ends theoretical engagement through study. In both cases of simply applying these fitting categories, we miss the way I have so far engaged with personas: from the inside. Personas fit into both the concepts of transparency and seduction, so to choose to apply either one or the other would be to miss a central part of them: the tension between the two inside of personas. Both concepts are fitting, so both are a part of the full picture of personas. But the concepts are also at odds with each other, transparency makes simulation overt while seduction is secretive. And as I will show, seduction is also motivated by irrationality and an opposition to the system of simulation, while transparency is a function of said system. Following the so far established method, this analysis has to start from personas and work toward theoretical understanding, since this way they are understood using their own logic. This line of thought will provide an answer to my research question: the *value* of understanding online personas as hyperreal is gaining a way to engage with them *on their own terms*. This is particularly valuable because this understanding does not alter, remove or miss parts of the phenomenon of online personas.

Beyond an understanding of these online personas, Baudrillard's theory also offers new insights which lead to this way of engagement. These insights stem from the reasons for the *popularity* of these personas. Baudrillard gives reasons why we are *fascinate*d by simulated phenomena such as online personas. Fascination is important because it can come from two sources which both give more insight into the workings of simulation, and how personas embody them. We are fascinated by different facets of our simulated system. Firstly there is the *transparency* with which simulation can be shown to us, and then there is the escalation or intensification of the workings of simulation,

which can be ascribed to *seduction*. According to Baudrillard (2008, p. 100): “what fascinates everyone is the debauchery of signs, that reality, everywhere and always, is debauched by signs. This is the interesting game, and this is what happens in the media, in fashion, in publicity and more generally, in the spectacle of politics, technology, science, […].” This especially fits personas and their spectacle of trying to figure out their identity, to our confusion and amazement concerning their antics which defy standard identity, comedy and politics. Baudrillard (2008, p. 100) effectively illustrates *why* we are fascinated by personas, because: “the perversion of reality, the spectacular distortion of facts and representations, the triumph of simulation is as fascinating as catastrophe--[…] For this effect of simulation, or of seduction, as you please, we are ready to pay any price, much more than any of the “real” quality of life.” We are ready to pay any price to see facts and representations distorted by personas, because it is more fascinating than any “real” quality of life. This is understandable, as personas present a confusingly fascinating mystery through their hyperreality: showing their face yet anonymous, highly engaged yet disconnected from politics. Note how Baudrillard states that both overt simulation (i.e. transparency) and seduction elicit this fascinated reaction. They both stem from our current system of simulation, but are distinct. Transparency works akin to the being “debauched by signs”, as instead of “real” reference, being transparent about simulation shows that everything is simulated instead of real or fake. Seduction works like the “interesting game” Baudrillard speaks of, as instead of showing simulation for what it is, there is a quite mysterious game seemingly being played. This fascination with both phenomena, despite them being opposed (transparent vs mysterious), gives us the first clue as to the conclusion that it is not a question of either/or when it comes to seduction and transparency. Despite this, I will first analyse each in turn to see how apt each of the concepts are to describe personas.

3.2 Transparency

Usually, even within simulation, its possibility is implicit or unacknowledged. A celebrity on a talk show will reference their personal life as the source of their motivations and public appearance. But they actually make this reference not because their personal life is the source, but because saying it follows the rules of the model of a public figure. In the second chapter, I showed how this works for online profiles. In a similar manner, a celebrity follows guidelines for being a celebrity, to be acknowledged as one. Instead of naturally doing what they do, and being famous for it, they are famous for their acts which communicate their fame according to the *model* of fame (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 77). But personas are slightly different, they also follow similar models, but play with the rules of implementing these models, as they mention the rules while following them, while one is usually silent about or unaware of the rules they follow. If both appeared on this hypothetical talk show, and they were asked what motivated them to appear publicly, and inspire their fans, the celebrity would say something like: “I personally am motivated by my family, my community and my personal hardships, and I want to make people feel happy!” In contrast, the persona says something to the effect of: “you know how it is, just like all other “celebrities”, it’s in my job description to make people happy, and be motivated by family, community and personal hardships.” Beyond just seeming cynical, the persona points out that in his and the other celebrity’s actions, they both followed the model of how a celebrity should react to this question. The persona simply added that this is *part of being a celebrity*, rather than a personal choice with reference to any individual life. The celebrity references something *outside* their celebrity status while *implicitly* adhering to a model of what is expected, while the persona references the rules of being a celebrity *explicitly*. The persona does the same as the celebrity, but mentions that they are following the celebrity rules. What they do is *showing* that they are exactly following *models* of identity and celebrity to be one, instead of being one by virtue of an outside criterion. This makes simulation overt, because the persona shows that it is purely self-referential by referencing the rules of its own identity.

Taken more generally, personas fit into Baudrillard's view of what being transparent about simulation results in. What motivates our fascination with these overtly simulated phenomena according to Baudrillard (2008, p. 45) is *disappearance*, and being transparent about simulation itself results in this disappearance: "it is no longer the mode of production but the mode of disappearance that excites us." In the case of personas, there is a particular *disappearance* at work. This might seem odd, as personas make themselves and the rules they follow very *visible*. But because they are so up front about the rules of, for example, being a celebrity, they are no longer seen as *meaningfully following* them, and thus: not a celebrity at all. This extends to all the rules they follow yet subvert, through mentioning how they work. Meaningfully following any simulated model, comes with the assumption that you hold onto some sort of reference point *despite* simulation. The other celebrity in my earlier example, is seen as a real celebrity because they follow the rules for being one, but say they are one because of *other factors* (hard work, personal drive etc.) which work as points of reference. What the persona does, in contrast to other public figures and identities, is what Baudrillard (2008, p. 49) would call "obscenity", because it involves: "All structures turned inside out and exhibited, all operations rendered visible." With all operations rendered *visible* by personas, we cease not just to call them real or credible, but we also *stop engaging* with them entirely. In the talk show example, there is nothing meaningful left to say after the persona says "it's part of being a celebrity to make people happy, so I do that because I am one." After this, instead of diving deeply into personal motivations or other autobiographical 'distractions' we know exactly how this person functions: they follow the celebrity rules and that is it. But furthermore, instead of giving us new rules for interpreting this persona, the persona gives us everything up-front without any further ways to theoretically engage. This is because everything has already been *interpreted beforehand* by the model that the persona adheres to. In the case of the other celebrity, this would also be true, but we would be acting on the assumption that it wasn't, that there was actually some authentic core to find within the celebrity. The interview would stop, because we would then know that the actions of the persona are already included in the simulated models they follow. Through personas that make simulation overt we are, in Baudrillard's (2008, p. 118) words; "confronted with the anticipated verification of our behaviour […] We are never again confronted with our own will or with that of the other." The persona confronts us with the fact that all the rules they follow also extend to us. Our own identity too must conform to a pre-generated model to be seen as an identity, and we can only see the other when they appear through this same design. Models precede everything we do, since we can only appear as having an identity or meaningful engagement, when we follow them (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 118). In this interview with the online persona, from the moment they make it clear how they, and by extension all of us, simply follow certain models of identity, we are all simply 'going through the motions' of doing an interview. Since we now all *have to acknowledge* that we follow these models. The talk show host asks a question that a talk show host would ask, and the celebrity answers how a celebrity should answer, et cetera. Having to face this makes even theoretical engagement very difficult, since the philosopher would then also have to concede, in engagement with the persona, that they are also following entirely simulated models that precede them. If the subject matter is already anticipated and interpreted beforehand, there is no way to keep studying and interpreting it.

In the explicit mentioning of its own rules, the online persona disappears, as the only criteria we have left for it are already established and reference nothing but itself. This means that for theoretical engagement, we lose our *object of study* if we categorise online personas as entirely transparent. Being entirely transparent would mean that personas have no motives other than following various

models of (online) identity, politics and online interaction, and then showing them for what they are. This showing of simulation has no further subversive character, since afterwards there is nothing more to do with the information, since exactly all workings have been laid bare and we already know how simulation functions at that point. Online personas do not actually interact with any content, only the form of the models, and they do not even pretend to have any further reference. They actively deter any interaction because their showing of simulation means we always engage with them at their level, a level which has no content. Surprisingly however, Baudrillard (2008, p. 33) refers to the positive aspects of this deterrence of interaction, albeit in a roundabout way. Without any connection between a phenomenon that seems dangerous or controversial (such as personas) and an actual (political, moral, theoretical) goal, there is no need to worry about the phenomenon or its (negative) impact. He speaks of this in the context of nuclear war: "There is no longer any useful correlation between the potential for annihilation and its objective" There is no link between the means of waging war, and the reasons for doing so. This is similar to online personas who claim to be referring to true goals (political, comedic) but have no actual objective that does not refer to themselves. According to Baudrillard, it is not only we who are deterred from interaction, but: "the system dissuades itself, and this is the paradoxically beneficial aspect of dissuasion: there is no more space for war." Taken more generally, this means that any purely self-referential (hyperreal) phenomenon leaves no space for real violence or transgression, since it does *not* refer to any *real objective* of destruction. In the case of personas, if interpreted through the lens of transparency, this means that they are essentially harmless. This interpretation could make it possible to wave away the offensive aspects of Sam Hyde's content, and the political impact of Greg Guevara's campaign, eschewing the need for any engagement at all.

Transparency, and the resulting lack of engagement stem from the *hyperreality* of online personas. Others such as celebrities hold on to the illusion of depth to their personality, while personas disregard this entirely. With being only a self-referential surface comes our inability to interact with them on any more than a surface level. This hyperreality, as I showed in the previous chapters, comes from them being both real and unreal, anonymous and visible, authentic and inauthentic. In applying transparency to them as well, we view their characteristics as all showing simulation overtly, and thus deterring us from further engagement. Using Baudrillard, we can see that this has the somewhat positive side-effect of making them harmless. We lose engagement, but we gain security. Yet this does not fully capture online personas, as they have far more controversial parts such as their use of irony and their seemingly underlying political agenda.

3.3 Seduction

In contrast to the results of applying transparency to personas, seduction fits in with the controversial and potentially harmful or antagonistic parts of personas. Phenomena that deal with the force of seduction are inherently secretive, instead of transparent. Furthermore, the force of seduction concerns those things which cannot be depicted (Lepers, 2009, p. 135). The unknowability of personas can be ascribed to the workings of *transparency* that deters further interaction, but could also be interpreted as a sign of their *secrecy.* Their image, or its disappearance, can be interpreted as a working of transparency which leaves us unable to interact, but it can also be seen as an image which is *unable to be depicted*, just like seduction. Instead of the persona making itself so known that it becomes invisible, it could instead be undepictable from the start. The key difference with the transparent interpretation of personas and the seductive one, are the unsolvable, secret and unpredictable parts of personas, their hidden antagonisms. These hidden parts are exactly antagonistic because they are at odds with the system of simulation. As I explained in the previous chapter, the system of production and the following system of simulation are motivated by the control of objects (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 73). This control is rational, which puts it at odds with

seduction because seduction is irrational and happens for its own sake, not for the sake of productivity (Lepers, 2009, p. 72). Online personas, if interpreted through seduction, play the game of identity and online interaction *for its own sake*, as we have seen they are overtly self-referential in their use of irony and their lack of reference to real goals. Despite this, personas still have this *seeming agenda*. They do not actually reference (despite claiming to do so) what we see as 'real goals' such as political change or entertainment, but there is the sense that something other than self-reference underlies their actions. This goes for seduction as well, because despite its irrationality, seduction is a force that 'aims' at the reversal of the system, to make it end in its opposite (Lepers, 2009, p. 67, 169). While this seems like a clear-cut aim, it is still inherently irrational, as the reversal of a rational system is itself irrational. If it is managed to make a rational system do something irrational, that itself is irrational. This goal, if ascribed to personas, could explain their strangely secretive methods that hide but at the same time reveal their identity, the contradictions in their methods and stated goals, and their use and change of irony into a nigh un-understandable form.

The two case studies, the prime examples of personas, can be seen as more *antagonistic* than they are transparent and deterring interaction. While interaction with them leaves us with more questions than answers, they do keep up continuous interaction and opposition to them through their following and media coverage. In the first chapter I highlighted *deception* as a key difference between personas' and other online users. The antagonism and deception present in seduction is important to Baudrillard (2008, p. 112), as he says there is great "power of deception and absorption, entrapment and diversion" and "subtle revenge" present in seduction. Baudrillard frames seduction in a way as the *vengeance* of the object, an object that, far from being perfectly controlled (in the case of personas: by following models), merely "pretends to obey." Personas could be seen as doing this very thing: merely pretending to obey the laws of digital and social conduct, the simulated models of identity, bending them in accordance with their deeper goals. This offers an alternative interpretation of the examples I gave in the previous section. Instead of halting any further theoretical engagement by giving us an exact explanation of what models they follow, personas could be seen as subverting models by making us unable to engage according to these very models. This is what Baudrillard (2008, p. 100) means with the *escalation* of simulation: models made so clear that they cannot be followed anymore. Online personas, in the transparent reading, show us how simulation functions, but this very overtness makes us unable to do anything with the information. This might leave us with nothing to do, or in interpreting them through seduction, it might point to a different or deeper layer that needs to be unearthed to understand what online personas are doing when they show us this overt simulation. This fits with the sense that personas have some hidden agenda which is unknown to us, possibly beyond entertainment or even political goals. Online personas could be, in Baudrillard's (2008, p. 109) words "unhappy with the process of observation" and "fooling us." A persona could have "no desire at all to be analysed and observed, and taking this process for a challenge […] it's answering with a challenge". This process refers to the making-visible of everything: transparency. Transparency makes simulation visible, but perhaps personas still manage to obscure their true aims despite this, seeing the attempts to uncover their goals and identity as challenges from this system of simulation.

While seeing online personas more as following the force of seduction seems to give us insight into their deeper goals, seeing them through this concept also leaves us with very little theoretical engagement. Transparency shows us exactly how simulation, and the persona, functions, but gives us nothing to do with this information. Seduction, while working in more mysterious ways, is also impenetrable and practically unemployable as a strategy or avenue for analysis (Lepers, 2009, p. 169). The category of seduction itself, and the possible goals of seduction and antagonism that

personas could have, only functions if left 'intact' and thus inherently unknowable because of its irrationality. Furthermore, because seduction is a force that aims at the reversal of our current system, it might be exceedingly difficult to use existing (rational) concepts from this system to analyse it. This process of antagonising the system, that seems to be inside personas, although we can name it and have suspicions about it, remains on the fringes of what we can understand. In labelling them as agents of the force of seduction, undermining our current system, we have a way to categorise online personas, but not a way to further engage. What the analysis of personas through seduction would do then, is tell us that they are enacting some sort of deeper subversion of the system, but without any way to know how, why or when. If personas give an actual substantial and rational answer to "what deeper goal are you aiming at?" then they have ceased to aim at a *deeper* goal through irrational means.

3.4 The tension between

Labelling online personas as either fully transparent or seductive gives us little to work with. Fully interpreting all their actions as making simulation overt reveals their inner workings but ends any further investigation because everything is already anticipated through models. Fully interpreting their actions as irrationally aiming at a deeper subversive goal gives us something to call them (seductive), but gives us no further information. To simplify: one gives us all the information but nothing to do, and the other gives us something to do but no information. And for theoretical engagement to work, we need information (theory) to act on (engagement). As I have eluded to earlier, we can achieve this theoretical engagement by shifting our object of study. If we take the *transparent persona* as our object, we have nothing more to study or act on. If we take the *seductive persona* as our object of study, then our object of study is inherently unable to be studied. Because of the commitment of my research to understand personas as they are, without reducing them in any way, we need to study all parts of them. Online personas can be understood as transparent *and* seductive, and these two concepts are opposed. So firstly, for the sake of theoretical engagement, we cannot choose either one or the other. And secondly, holding onto both yields an inherent opposition that we need to work with. This yields a new object of study: the *tension or opposition* between personas being seductive and transparent. So in this final section I will explain this tension further, and propose ways we can theoretically engage with it.

Baudrillard (2008, p. 99) both illustrates and advocates for this analysis of tension in his works. He pits seduction and transparency against each other. He characterises seduction as "immoral" and antagonistic yet effective for change, while transparency halts interpretation, action and change. Baudrillard (2008, p. 100) claims that there are two *forces* at work here. The force which makes simulation overt, transparency, attempts "to extirpate this disobedience, this debauch, this evil genie, by annihilating everything right up to the "irrational" motivations in the mind of man." This force tries to push back against the *irrationality* and "immoral" antagonistic sides of seduction, which attempt to subvert the system of simulation. According to Baudrillard, the force of transparent simulation has "always condemned people to more or less a slow death." This *slow* death refers to the ways in which transparency halts interaction, and exerts control over us. This can be seen in the example of the persona that says exactly how they are following models of identity and celebrity, and the subsequent lack of ways to react to this. But despite this force of transparent simulation pushing back against the irrational force of seduction and seeking to erase it, Baudrillard (2008, p. 100) holds that: "The energy of vice is irreplaceable, precisely because it is an energy of fission and rupture, for which they have very naively wanted to substitute a mechanical energy of production." Baudrillard already shows here, that it is naïve to choose one force over the other in general. And more specifically, this fits with the outcomes of the two previous sections: choosing transparency over seduction does not work for any sort of engagement, and vice versa. Baudrillard instead shows

that both rationality and irrationality are at work at the same time, in opposition to one another and attempting to erase each other. The transparent reading of personas for example, would remove any trace of persona's seeming agenda, while the seductive reading removes the ways in which they overtly show their simulated workings. Instead of an analysis through one or the other, Baudrillard gives us a new guiding principle. Baudrillard (2008, p. 104) advocates for the revival of the Manichean "Principle of Evil" which "demands that any order exists only to be disobeyed, attacked, exceeded, and dismantled." This is an "evil" principle because it concerns the antagonism in seduction (attempting to subvert the system), this principle might cause upheaval and disorder, which is why it is called "evil." In contrast, the "good" side can be ascribed to transparency, since it has the somewhat positive side-effect of security. Transparency anticipates everything and thus makes phenomena like online personas harmless. But Baudrillard poses this opposition between the two in terms of good and evil not to celebrate either one or the other. He rather uses it to pose a "fundamental duplicity" between the two. This duplicity is present in online personas: between transparency and seduction, between the times they affirm and show the current system, and the ones where they seem to be subverting it.

Beyond a way to *view* the tension between these two forces, Baudrillard (2008 p. 104) also gives us a principle of *analysing* this tension: "This is the basic rule: for a group or individual to live, it can never aim at its own good, its own interest, its own ideal. It always has to aim elsewhere, to the side, beyond, off center, […] It is useless to reconcile these two principles." We cannot aim at the persona as seductive, nor as transparent, we need instead to not even aim at the analysis of the persona at all but at the analysis of the tension within them. This shows that we have to shift the object of study to the tension present within online personas, in order to understand them as they are. To apply either one would be to subject them to outside categories, and to remove key parts of them. Only by acknowledging tension, and studying tension instead of personas, can we theoretically engage with them on their own terms. In a way this mirrors online personas, and uses their own logic, as they too do not aim directly at any clear goal or objective yet do seem to accomplish something. This approach allows for further study since we are not directly engaging with personas through questioning them, looking at their appearances and content, but looking at another factor inside of them. This factor, the tension between two parts of them, remains a constant that can be studied and acted on. So to continue theoretical engagement, we can look to the case studies for example, and identify key moments where they affirm either transparency or seduction, then instead of analysing those moments further, we compare the two to gain an understanding of tension. This 'dodges' the direct sort of engagement that personas make difficult and instead aims at understanding the tension they create between the two sides of them. This is one of several avenues of analysis that my research offers.

Conclusion

I have now given two answers to my original research question, the value of understanding online personas as hyperreal can; (1) be seen as merely theoretical, giving us understanding at the cost of more conventional forms of (moral or political) engagement or (2) be used to both understand and engage with these personas, albeit through a different medium of analysis. This different medium is Baudrillard's theoretical framework of simulation and the duplicitous tension between *seduction* and *transparent simulation* present within it. To reach this answer I first posed the problem of what I tentatively called online personas: the blurred reality of certain online identities, and the potential political and moral consequences of this blurring for engagement and accountability. I then made the idea of online personas more concrete by applying Sherry Turkle's analyses of the online sphere to the phenomenon, which I used to highlight four criteria for online personas. These criteria then

served as the basis for an application of Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, with the intent to show what we can understand by applying it, but also what forms of engagement it offers us. This culminated in the two possible answers, and my proposal of using the second one.

This research has given a theoretical way to engage with the phenomenon of online personas, by refusing to take them as objects of study and instead studying the tension within them. This is of course not a full theory of this tension, but a setup for further research. As I proposed, through the concepts of transparency, seduction and their fundamental tension, we can look at specific examples of online personas affirming either side and compare these examples to study the tension between them. The exact content of this tension requires a further look into the case studies, and can perhaps be done with similar cases. Other phenomena that pose a difficulty for political, moral or even epistemic theories could be analysed using this principle of aiming at their inner tension instead of categorising them into one or another concept or theory. One phenomenon which bears similarities to online personas is that of the populist, who employs a similar blurring of fake and real and might hold a similar tension between transparency and seduction, or other concepts.

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