Reading the Biopic through Persona: A Comparison between *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*

Personas are the public expressions of a private identity, the performance of personality in the social world. They are particularly visible and familiar in the world of celebrity, where entertainers regularly adopt an alter-ego for performance. This has intriguing consequences for biographical representations of performers. Biopic actors are obliged to duplicate the public-facing persona, which is an already-known, semi-fictional construction, and the private individual beneath. The narrative of the biopic must account for this relationship between the persona and the person who authors it. This article explores this process in two high-profile rock biopics, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) and *Rocketman* (2019), comparing their different approaches to reproducing and exploring the persona of their subjects in performance, style and *mise en scène*.

Keywords

PERSONA

BIOGRAPHY

BIOPIC

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

ROCKETMAN

ELTON JOHN

FREDDIE MERCURY

Date submitted: 02/12/2020

Date accepted: 19/03/2021

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One of the central tasks for biography—whether in written or audiovisual form—is to account for the dynamic between a subject’s public and private lives. Biopics fulfil generic expectations by producing a recognizable recreation of the public figure while simultaneously promising to represent the “real” person behind the mask. The mask itself has become an object of increasing scholarly scrutiny, thanks to the development of persona studies. Persona is a public version of the self, a constructed performance of identity that is made meaningful in the relationship between its presentation and reception. It is particularly visible in the world of entertainment in the maintenance of a star alter-ego. Biographical representations of entertainers, then, provide an exploration of the meaning and value of persona. In film or television, though, this is problematized by the presence of an actor performing as the biographee. Jean-Louis Comolli (1978) noted that historical films have the problem of “a body too much,” where the text must contend with the co-presence of the bodies of the actor, the character and the implied “real” historical personage. Persona complicates this further, since the body can house multiple selves. Actors must embody not only the public face of the historical person, but the private individual that adopts this persona. Reading the biopic through the lens of persona enables us to see the complexity inherent in the representation of real people in fiction film.

This essay will compare two recent British/American musician biopics via the concept of persona. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018) dramatizes the lives of the rock band Queen, with a focus on its charismatic, enigmatic front man Freddie Mercury (Rami Malek). It retraces the band’s stellar though

tumultuous career until its putative peak, their performance at the Live Aid charity event in July 1985. *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019) transforms the biography of singer-songwriter Elton John (Taron Egerton) into a fantasy jukebox musical in which John’s hits are reframed as musical numbers that illustrate various phases in his life. In keeping with the genre conventions of the music biopic (Marshall and Kongsgaard 2012), it dramatizes the cost to Elton’s personal life of maintaining an extravagant celebrity persona. The narrative begins with Elton entering a rehabilitation facility to cure his various addictions. His life story is then told in extended flashbacks which are framed as his memories, motivated by his biographical confessions to his therapy group. I will analyze these texts through the conceptual lens of persona, exploring how performance, style and narrative produce a replication of these celebrity selves in public and private. I will combine close textual analysis of the films with an examination of their paratexts, including promotional and marketing materials, to demonstrate how the discourse circulating around these films contributes to their reconstruction of the star persona.

P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore and Kim Barbour argue that “Personas are mutable public masks worn, not to obscure our features, but to present them to the world” (Marshall, Moore and Barbour 2020, 75). This has two important implications: first, that analysis of persona will always involve the interplay between the public and the private; and second that a persona is not only a subject, a self or an identity, but is the interface between the individual and the social. While an individual may appear to be the sole “author” of their persona, the meaning of persona takes place at the level

of reception as well as performance. The term “persona” has its roots in the Latin term for “mask” and is an analytical category developed from the discipline of dramaturgy. This background was drawn on by Erving Goffman (1956) in his influential study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he analyses various performative “fronts” that are adopted by people in social scenarios to express status and identity, and to enable routinized interactions to take place. Goffman’s text demonstrated that, rather than persona being limited to the presentation of self performed by public figures and professional performers, it applies to *all* individuals. Carl Jung argued that persona is an expression of the collective psyche performed by an individual. He describes persona as a “compromise formation in which others often have a greater share in the making than the individual himself” (1928, 165). For Jung, this makes persona only a “secondary” or “two-dimensional” reality. Persona therefore operates in a liminal space not only between the private individual and their public front, but between the supposedly “real” individual and their presentation of a socially-sanctioned character.

Though personas have a “fictive quality” (Marshall, Moore and Barbour 2015), it would be a mistake to assume that the persona is an entirely falsified projection, and that the person underneath is the valid or genuine self. Sheryl Hamilton argues that:

A persona is a socially active, culturally produced trace of the person, a copy of the person, and yet never subordinate to its original. The persona is the concrete manifestation of the necessarily individuating abstraction that is the person. To render something a person is to make it abstract, to make it generalizable, to individuate it, to place it in a larger category with other similar entities. (2009, 11)

In this conceptualization, a “person” is no more real than a persona. It is the interpretation of various social attributes attached to an individual and held together by narrative. A person necessarily has a “life story,” though the self to whom this is attached may change enormously during the course of their personhood. For Marshall, Moore and Barbour, the concept of persona reminds us that selves are not fixed but “constantly updated projection[s] of identity presented and enacted for the benefit of communicating to, and maintaining relations with others” (Marshall, Moore and Barbour 2020, 25). Person and persona are linked through the figure of the individual, each an expression of the other.

Marshall et al (2015) argue that personas are *presentational*, deliberate strategies for the creation of selves in the public realm, but that celebrity personas have historically been managed in, through and for *representational* media like radio, cinema, television, newspapers and magazines. This argument calls to mind James Naremore’s (1990) distinction between presentational and representational acting, where the former involves a self-consciousness about the circumstances of performance and conditions of display, and the latter entails the actor attempting to erase themselves and the markers of their performance beneath the character in the pursuit of naturalism. Colleen Kennedy-Karpat draws on this idea in her argument that “Mainstream biopic acting blurs these categories: while representational in the conventional demand for the actor to embody the character as completely and believably as possible, biopic acting is also presentational in that the labor of performance is always obvious” (2020: 396).

Actors are required to portray historical characters both in

impersonation of their public persona *and* in convincing depiction of the person, their (assumed) private identity. The degree of accuracy—in terms of close approximation or replication of bodily gesture, vocal articulation and manner—of performances of persona can be measured. As Lucy Fife Donaldson argues:

Expectations about overall accuracy seem to be directly related to physical resemblance, and as such, material decisions about the embodiment of a life signal an immediate indication of any given biopic's relationship to actuality and fiction. The performer's body becomes the film's statement of how it will address biography, and this body thus defines our relationship to events as they are depicted. (2014, 106)

The extent to which this replication of persona can be compared with “evidence,” especially from recorded media, has a strong bearing on the critical reception of biopic performances and their success in industry awards (Cheshire 2015; Kennedy-Karpat 2020). Rami Malek's ability to replicate Freddie Mercury's stage persona to a high level of mimesis goes some way to explain his success at the 2019 Academy Awards. The conventional model for assessing a film performance, however, is to consider how psychologically rounded, emotionally convincing and affectively rich it is. Scenes in which the actor performs the person rather than the persona afford a better opportunity to evaluate success in these terms, though there is no equivalent “evidence” against which this aspect of a performance can be compared. As Marshall and Kongsgaard (2012, 356) note, their plausibility often hinges on reproducing tropes of popular music stardom that accord with a collective understanding of what celebrities are like.

Celebrities are the most visible manifestation of the phenomenon of persona. Indeed, much cultural understanding of persona is shaped by regular exposure to celebrity performances of self, especially in representational media like film, television or photography. As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond contend,

It is precisely the mediated status of stars and celebrities, and the highly performative context in which they appear, that activates this contradictory dynamic, fostering questions such as: is there a distinction between our “private” and “public” selves? Do we have any unique, essential, “inner” self, or are we simply a site of self-performance and public presentation? (2006, 9)

Hamilton argues that celebrities present a “complex hybrid, the always contingent and unstable fusion of person and persona” (2009, 190). Celebrities reveal the labor and authorship of the individual in creating a persona, anchoring it in a specific identity while also showing its mutability. Hamilton suggests that celebrities represent a “deep seated crisis in authenticity” because they demonstrate the troubling fact that we cannot distinguish between real person and performance (2009, 227). In making overt and obvious the distinction between persona and person, though, celebrities also reaffirm ideas of authenticity, by implying through its suppression a “real” essence subsumed by the persona.

Tom Doyle's biography of Elton John uses “Reg Dwight” (his given name) to refer to one half of his subject's personality, the shy, introverted private figure beneath the glamorous, self-assured celebrity persona. This is often expressed as though there are two distinct personalities embodied in a single person: “when you talk to Elton, Reg is never far away” (2017, xiii). *Rocketman* persistently plays with

the co-existence of Reg and Elton, most obviously in sequences where the adult Elton interacts with his younger self, Reggie (Matthew Illesley). The first interaction occurs in Elton's rehabilitation group, prompted by the therapist asking him "what were you like as a child?" Musing on his answer, Elton is distracted by the sound of a bicycle bell, a sound of uncertain diegetic provenance on the soundtrack. He turns to see a five-year-old Reggie, dressed neatly in school uniform and perched on a trike, staring back at him (Fig. 1). As Elton begins to sing "The Bitch is Back," starting with the lyric "I was justified when I was five," Reggie, filmed in medium close-up from a slightly high angle, to replicate Elton's point-of-view, smiles and shakes his head. Eyeline matched reverse shots show Elton, confused and frustrated by this encounter with his judgmental inner child. The physical co-presence of Elton and Reggie is repeated several more times in the film using this eyeline match, shot/reverse shot structure, combined with wider angle two-shots which show both actors on screen at the same time. Conventional film grammar for a conversation between two people is used to literalize the conflict between person and persona.

To underline this distinction between person and persona, *Rocketman* explores the creation of the "Elton John" alter-ego at some length. Doyle describes Elton John's change of name as a "eureka moment" in his life, quoting John directly: "changing it was, psychologically, a big boost for me" (2017, 26). The film provides narrative context for Elton's adoption of a new persona in a sequence in which, while working as an organist in the band Bluesology, the teenage Reg asks soul singer Wilson (Jason Pennycooke) "how does a fat boy from Pinner with glasses called Reggie Dwight, get to be a soul man?" Wilson aphoristically replies

that "you've got to kill the person you were born to be to become the person you want to be" and advises him to change his name. Reg then auditions for music producer Ray Williams (Charlie Rowe). He impresses Ray by extemporizing a song at the piano. When asked his name, a medium-close-up of Reg shows the slight hesitation in his eyes as he is about to improvise again. "Elton" he lies, borrowing the first name of one of his bandmates. When asked his surname, he turns his head, and the camera follows his eyeline, a pan and refocus alighting on a framed photograph of The Beatles. A spotlight picks out John Lennon's face, providing Elton his new appellation. This is accompanied on the soundtrack by the non-diegetic sound of a gospel choir, organ and drum fill, the music of divine inspiration. This fictionalization¹ parodies cinematic cliché to retain the "eureka" moment, although Elton fails to "kill" Reggie completely, as evidenced by his regular return to Elton's consciousness throughout the film.

By contrast, *Bohemian Rhapsody* implies very little co-existence between Farrokh Bulsara and Freddie Mercury. The film mines Freddie's eschewal of his heritage for dramatic conflict. This is especially true in the few scenes that feature the Bulsara family. For example, it dramatizes the adoption of the Freddie Mercury name as a scene of familial disruption. At a birthday tea party held in the middle-class coziness of the Bulsara's suburban household, Freddie's mother (Meneka Das) is taken by surprise as his girlfriend Mary (Lucy Boynton) does not know his birth name is Farrokh. This prompts a discussion of the family's history which visibly bores Freddie, who moves to a piano in an adjoining room. A series of rack focuses between Freddie in the foreground and his family in the background visualize this tug-of-war between Freddie as

Fig. 1: Elton (Taron Egerton) encounters his “inner child” Reggie (Matthew Illesley) during a therapy session. *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019).

performer and his original identity (Fig. 2). As he announces he has changed his name legally, he grandly declares “No looking back. Only forward.” This reflects Mercury’s apparent attempt to erase all trace of his pre-persona identity. Biographers Matt Richards and Mark Langthorne quote Mercury’s close friend as saying “he never wanted to talk about any period in his life before he became Freddie Mercury” (2016, 63). Promotional paratexts for the film frequently emphasize this aspect of his biography. For example, in the behind-the-scenes documentary “Rami Malek: Becoming Freddie” (*Bohemian Rhapsody* 2019), Queen drummer Roger Taylor observes that “[Mercury] invented himself as an act of pure willpower and intelligence.” This statement discursively frames Mercury as an amalgam of reality and fiction, and, given its position in a discussion of the actor’s embodiment of Mercury, it implicitly endorses Malek’s appropriation of the Freddie persona.

Marshall, Moore and Barbour note that the idea of persona “indicates the projection of a character, or role, by an actor [...] an entirely embodied performance that includes sound, posture, movement and other shaping effects of stance, projection and circumstance” (2020, 24). Conceptualizing a celebrity persona as a character perpetually being created and portrayed by its “author,” permits us to decouple the persona from the celebrity body. If this is the case, Taron Egerton has as much claim to be Elton John as Elton John does. This is implied by the film’s poster campaign, which proclaimed that “Taron Egerton is Elton John.” In a tie-in book for the film, Egerton explains that John delivered the advice “don’t copy me,” which he “took as gospel”: “what I’ve tried to do is capture the spirit of him rather than do an impersonation of him; it’s my take on him” (*Rocketman*:

Inside... 2019, 16). Egerton is here claiming a level of authorship over the persona as it appears in the film. This desire to distance biopic performance from an impersonation is a common characteristic of actors performing as real people, as Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (2010) found in their interviews with performers who have portrayed biographical subjects. This can be explained by the fact that, as Belén Vidal notes, impersonation is a “devalued” form of acting that “suggests a superficial (and often parodic) act of mimicry, which is rarely accorded the praise bestowed on performances that not only convey the physicality of a character but also seem to reveal some kind of essence” (2014, 141). Egerton’s claim to authorship of the Elton role is bolstered by the stylistic choice taken by the production team to have Egerton sing the Elton John repertoire in the musical numbers for the film. Marshall and Kongsgaard argue that when actors do their own singing in musical biopics, it “unites actor and subject in the mind of the audience” (2012, 357), helping to authenticate the actor’s performance as well as binding them to the singer’s persona. The generic framing of the film as fantasy musical sets the numbers at a sufficient remove to support the suspension of disbelief. Self-consciousness thus compensates for the sense of inauthenticity caused by the loss of John’s real singing voice. By contrast, the decision in *Bohemian Rhapsody* to have Malek lip sync to recordings of Mercury singing places an extra level of mediation between actor and character in his incarnation of Freddie.² Mercury is palpable beneath the performance, a spectral presence but, crucially, a disembodied one. A brief scene in which Queen balk at being required to mime on *Top of the Pops* can be read as an ironic commentary on the mediated simulation of rock music. It

Fig. 2: Freddie (Rami Malek) occupies the foreground, while his family are present but out-of-focus in the background in a scene in which he announces his formal adoption of a new persona. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018).

also emphasizes the compromise of authenticity when performers mime.

As Theo van Leeuwen (2001) argues, authenticity can be understood in three ways: to mean that something is “genuine” as in, not an imitation or copy; to suggest a faithful reconstruction or representation; or in the sense of being “authorized,” bearing a verified signature.

Rocketman and *Bohemian Rhapsody* represent an uneasy combination of these contradictory meanings of authenticity. In terms of authorization, both were made with the (qualified) involvement of the figures portrayed. The marketing for *Rocketman* highlights John’s involvement in the film: he is an executive producer; he wrote and performed an original signature song for its soundtrack (“I’m Going to Love Me Again”); and he engaged in publicity activities such as attending the film’s premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2019, making television appearances, conducting press interviews, and writing for *The Observer* newspaper (John 2019). Promotional paratexts construct a narrative about the film’s production that John ceded control of his own story to enable screenwriter Lee Hall and director Dexter Fletcher to reimagine it creatively. The tie-in book, for example, states “Elton knew and trusted Hall and gave him ‘incredible free rein on the script’” (*Rocketman: Inside...* 2019, 10). This framing of John’s involvement in the production enables the film to benefit from his endorsement of its representation and permission for its divergence from truth. This is captured in the film’s tagline, “Based on a True Fantasy.” Such authorization was impossible for *Bohemian Rhapsody*, made nearly thirty years after Mercury’s death. The film was made with the participation of two of the three remaining members of Queen, who claim that their involvement was chiefly intended to “protect Freddie’s legacy”

(*Bohemian Rhapsody* 2019). Their influence on the film’s representation of Mercury may explain the prevalent narrative theme of Freddie and Queen’s mutual dependence upon one another: “you need us Freddie, more than you know” says Brian May (Gwilym Lee) during an altercation in the film’s middle act. Given the need for the film’s producers to appease the remaining members of Queen in their representation of the band, this is a metatextual statement. This Freddie does, indeed, need May and Taylor.

Van Leeuwen’s other sense of “authentic” is the close approximation or replica of an original, and this is a key driver of authenticity for both films. *The Rocketman* tie-in book (*Rocketman: Inside...* 2019) includes an image of Taron Egerton scrutinizing a photograph of Elton John performing at Los Angeles’ Dodger Stadium in October 1975, and simultaneously mimicking the bodily positioning from the picture. This sequence represents a crucial narrative moment in the film. Elton attempts suicide at a party, by overdosing and throwing himself into a swimming pool. He rescued, then strapped to a gurney as he sings “Rocket Man.” Filmed in closeup from a birds-eye angle, he fights off the oxygen mask and painfully has his stomach pumped. A dolly long-shot then captures Elton’s trolley being pushed fluidly through an airport as the medical staff dance around his body (Fig. 3). Presented in silhouette thanks to natural backlighting, the status and role of the people surrounding Elton is unclear, as is whether they are there to assist him, or to strongarm him into performing. In keeping with the “rocket man” metaphor—or literalization—their costume of crisp white jumpsuits with red detailing signifies simultaneously that they

are a medical team *and* an engineering crew. Elton is finally whisked to the stage of the Dodger stadium, where he puts on a fake smile, concludes the song on stage and eventually takes off into the sky, transforming into a large sapphire firework. This sequence mixes the melancholy reality of Elton's depression, drug abuse and suicidal ideation with fantasy images that represent his desire for escape. It also merges a fictional musical number with a reconstruction of real images of Elton John from the Dodger stadium concert, especially photographs taken by Terry O'Neill (2019) [Fig. 4]. Describing the scene in a documentary paratext on the Blu-Ray disc release of the film, Egerton notes that "if you look at the photos from that event there's a few shots that I sort of glide from pose to pose in the hope of achieving some sense of authenticity." This contradicts the impulse elsewhere in the film's paratexts to claim that Egerton authors an Elton persona specific to the film, as features that combine to make a performance of persona—gesture and stance—are being copied from an "original" evidential source. Replicating images from photographic record produces a surface-level authenticity intended to lend credibility to the fictionalization, though one that sits uncomfortably within the film's fantastical framing of John's biography.

This attempt at close mimesis is much clearer in the feted recreation in *Bohemian Rhapsody* of Queen's set at Live Aid, in July 1985. The significance of this moment in Mercury's career is highlighted by the film's narrative structure, where the story of Queen's rise to fame is bookended by a sequence of the mental and physical preparation Freddie undergoes for the event at the beginning of the film, and a lengthy reconstruction of the concert as the film's conclusion. There are brief moments in this sequence that highlight Freddie's interiority, especially the

intense extreme close-up on his eyes as he surveys the spectacle of the huge audience before him. However, many shots closely reconstruct the television coverage of the event, with Malek precisely mirroring Mercury's gestures, movements and facial expressions, including his self-conscious gestures *to* the television cameras. This is reinforced by brief glimpses of the television sets on which Freddie's parents, lover and even Live Aid organizer Bob Geldof (Dermot Murphy) watch Queen's set unfold (Fig. 5). The Live Aid scene works along the logic of the "visual mash-up," as explained by Sara Brinch. Brinch discusses the use of computer graphics to digitally merge footage of real events with a staged version made for the fiction text. While *Bohemian Rhapsody* replicates the coverage of Live Aid rather than merging it, it maintains what Brinch calls a "strategy of indexing something as authentic by presenting it as mediated" (2013, 230). This sequence underlines the extent to which Malek's version of Freddie works through a close approximation of Mercury's performance of persona. Susan Fast (2006) notes the mutual significance of Live Aid to Queen and Queen to Live Aid but notes that the central position of Queen's set in the cultural memory of the event has been constructed through subsequent television documentary and other ex post facto critical appreciations that have taken place since Mercury's death. *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s narrative privileging and clinically accurate recreation of the Live Aid set supplements the relevance of the concert to the popular memory of Mercury's persona. The recreation of Queen's Live Aid set in the film thus overlays Malek's appropriation of Mercury's musical persona with the popular memory of Mercury's performance. Two Freddie's at Live Aid

Fig. 3: The use of silhouette enables the blurring of lines between a medical team, engineers, and celebrity enablers as Elton's handlers strive to transport him to the Dodger Stadium. *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019).

Fig. 4: Egerton replicates the poses Elton John took at his Dodger Stadium concert documented in photographs by Terry O'Neill. *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019).

now exist. Both are fictional creations; the one authored by Mercury is a palimpsest for Malek's reproduction.

The most visible markers of surface-level authenticity are in styling: hair, make-up and costume. This is important in the reading of persona in biopics, since "persona definitionally implies an outward appearance of the individual" (Marshall 2014, 166). Hair and makeup in the biopic provide a likeness of the subject to aid in the audience's suspension of disbelief and to allow them to accept, temporarily, this facsimile of a person whose image is known in popular memory. The use of wigs and prosthetics for this purpose can have the unintended consequence of emphasizing the illusion by highlighting the layers of artifice that typically films made in the realist mode will try to render invisible. This is particularly noticeable in *Bohemian Rhapsody* in the prosthetic teeth worn by Malek. Mercury had four extra teeth in his top jaw, which made his mouth protrude into a distinctive overbite. Their recreation for the film renders Malek's mouth especially noticeable. Freddie's teeth are frequently mentioned in the film's dialogue, for example in a short sequence in the beginning of the film where, talking to Roger (Ben Hardy) and Brian, Freddie explains that he was born with extra incisors. Prominent in the background of the shot of Roger and Brian is a logo for their pre-Queen band, Smile: a large pair of red lips, with perfectly white, straight teeth, reinforcing the theme of the dialogue in the *mise en scène* (Fig. 6). This sequence deliberately draws attention to Freddie's teeth, thus Malek's dentures. The prosthetic physically alters the shape of Malek's mouth and vocal patterns in a way that affects his performance. Though the false teeth may have been designed for the sake of authenticity, their prominence underlines the artificiality of the likeness.

Costuming is used in both films to help replicate the celebrity personas of their protagonists and demonstrates another divergence in approach to authenticity despite their shared costume designer, Julian Day. For *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Day asserted in a documentary paratext that he perceived his task as one of faithful reproduction, since the looks of Queen are so well-documented (*Bohemian Rhapsody* 2019). This indicates that the opportunity the production offered to produce accurate reconstructions of the band's outfits also created a pressure to copy rather than originate. Here are two of Van Leeuwen's facets of authenticity: the accurate replica and, because May and Taylor lent access to their personal archives of costumes, authorized originals. Day suggests in an equivalent paratext for *Rocketman* that the film's fantasy generic framing endowed him more creative freedom: "as it's not a documentary, we wanted to create not necessarily a different Elton, but something for the film" (*Rocketman* 2019). Egerton observes that Elton's cumbersome but spectacular costumes show his growing defensiveness—"the clothes he's beginning to choose are about having an armor, protecting himself with increasingly large and thick costumes" (*Rocketman: Inside...* 2019, 156). Costumes thus have a metaphoric significance beyond the replication of real outfits worn by John. This is most clearly demonstrated in the signature costume of the film, a bright orange sequined jumpsuit with large, feathered angel wings and a headpiece with protruding horns (Fig. 7). At the opening of the film, Elton, wearing this costume, bursts through a wooden door, framed in bright white backlight. A choral version of the refrain from "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" on the soundtrack parallels the angelic theme, a contrast to Elton's

Fig. 5: Images of television sets playing Queen's Live Aid performance reinforce the sequence's claims to mimesis and authenticity to the original event. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018).

Fig. 6: The logo for the band Smile occupies a prominent place in the background of this scene, reiterating the theme of dentistry in the dialogue. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018).

demonic image. The extravagance of the outfit also contrasts with the mundanity of the setting, a large, warmly-lit hall, decorated only by the circle of folding chairs on which the rehabilitation group sits. The sequence draws comedically on the absurd contrast between the anonymity of the surroundings and the extravagance of Elton's image. As he sits down at the center of the group, a close-up of his eyes shows he is fighting back tears beneath orange-tinted, heart-shaped, diamante-studded glasses. This image punctually reveals the film's efforts to reveal the suffering of the person beneath the persona. As Elton progresses through therapy throughout flashforward sequences he removes parts of this costume, eventually stripped down to a grey fleece bath robe. This is a visual metaphor for the gradual breakdown of his celebrity persona, as the "real" Elton begins to emerge from beneath his "armor." This reflects John's claim that it was not until he became sober, at the age of forty-three, that he started to "sort out [his] personal persona" (Doyle 2017, 259). Costume therefore is not only a replication of the real, but also a figurative biographical commentary on John's life.

Therapy is an important thematic motif in *Rocketman*, core to the film's dissection of the Elton John persona. The film begins with an expression of identity made in confessional mode. Elton snarls: "My name is Elton Hercules John and I'm an alcoholic. And a cocaine addict. And a sex addict. And a bulimic. I'm also a shopaholic who has problems with weed, prescription drugs and anger management." This negative self-appraisal initiates the film's narrative structure as a search for self that mirrors the popular understanding of therapeutic discourse. The conceit also excuses the film's flights of musical fantasy, as the events in Elton's life are mediated through his (disordered) memory. As a

homodiegetic, overt narrator, Elton has a great degree of control over his own story and is revealed to be an unreliable storyteller. He claims, for example, that "I was a very happy child," but this is juxtaposed with a scene in which a five-year old Elton asks his father "when are you going to hug me?" only to be rebuffed. Instances of unreliability like this decrease as the film progresses, mirroring the progress of Elton through therapy in breaking down his persona and becoming increasingly honest about his own identity. Continually returning in flashback to the therapy setting reinforces that this is Elton's personal story, told from his perspective and for the purpose of psychological working through.

This first-person approach to the storytelling implies a level of autobiography that is not present in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The film declines to privilege Freddie's interiority as closely as *Rocketman* does Elton's. Instead, it suggests that Freddie's persona is the more authentic version of self. For instance, when Mary asks him what it is like to perform for large audiences, Freddie responds "I'm exactly the person I was always meant to be," aligning his self-identity squarely with his performance of persona. Freddie requires an audience, even if a private one, to fully inhabit his persona. This is dramatized in the film in the juxtaposition of two scenes. In the first, a lonely Freddie telephones Mary, now his neighbor, to ask her to have a drink with him. She refuses, so he attempts to orchestrate a situation where they remain visible to one another via signaling with their light switches. Freddie is unsatisfied by a verbal communication alone. He wants to be *seen*. He responds to this rejection by organizing a large party, which

Fig. 7: Elton's extravagant costume operates as a form of armor, and its gradual removal signifies a breaking down of persona. *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019).

provides him the audience he had clearly desired from Mary. He attends the party costumed as rock royalty, a large crown and scarlet fur-trimmed robe worn over tight leather trousers. While the symbolism of this costume is obvious, it also demonstrates the centrality of performance to Freddie's sense of self. Scott McKinnon critiques this sequence, suggesting that "the party is framed as a hollow extravagance masking Mercury's otherwise meaningless life" (2019, 577). It is equally arguable that the film's interpretation of Mercury is that his performance of a celebrity persona *was* the meaning of his life. This reinforces the sense that the film presents an exterior perspective on Mercury, a reconstruction of persona rather than exploration of personal identity.

It is in the film's reluctance to represent Mercury's queerness that its reticence to explore his identity is its most evident. Where *Rocketman* embraces Elton's sexual identity, in *Bohemian Rhapsody* Freddie's queerness is everywhere implied, nowhere explored. McKinnon for example, highlighted that the film portrays Freddie as a "tragic queen," and frames him through a "pitying heteronormative gaze" (2019, 557). This exemplifies the third-person approach that the film takes to Mercury; as McKinnon notes, he is depicted through the perspective of his heterosexual band mates. This is partially excused in the film by drawing on the deliberate obfuscation Mercury engaged in about his sexuality during his life. Richards and Langthorne quote from a fractious interview Mercury gave to *Melody Maker* in 1984 in which he complains that *The Sun* has misquoted him as "confessing" to being homosexual. When the journalist suggests that it would be, at that point in his career "good for business" to be gay, Mercury states: "If I tried that, people would start yawning 'Oh

God, here's Freddie Mercury saying he's gay because it's trendy to be gay'" (2016, 250). This implies that Mercury believed a greater integration between person and persona would be perceived as inauthentic because of its supposed strategic benefit. This ambivalent relationship with the press, the competition between Mercury and journalists for authorship of his persona, is dramatized in *Bohemian Rhapsody* in a short scene in which Queen engage in a disastrous press conference in 1982. The sequence is presented in a combination of medium-long shots that show the crowded, claustrophobic room edited swiftly together with closeups of the journalists, filmed slightly out of focus, from a low angle with fish-eye lenses (Fig. 8). This is disorientating, presenting a vicarious experience of Freddie's unease. The journalists at the press conference repeatedly turn their questioning to Freddie's personal life, attacking him for being dishonest about his queer identity and the possibility that he is HIV positive. Freddie's defensiveness shows his discomfort with the publicization of his private life, with the exploitation of the person rather than the persona.

While Freddie is happy to signify queerness in his public performances of persona and through his macho parody of excessive masculinity on-stage, he rejects the imposition of queer identity on his person. This is most evident in his relationship with Paul Preter (Allen Leech), his personal assistant who is constructed as the antagonist in the film, a Machiavellian figure who comes between Freddie and the rest of Queen. Paul is first introduced during a scene in which, during a break at a recording studio, Freddie is writing the song "Love of my Life," which he claims is a reference to Mary Austin. Paul responds "if you say so," and leans in to kiss Freddie. Freddie recoils defensively, claiming that Mary knows him in a

way no one else ever will. Paul looks him deeply in the eye and says “I know you, Freddie Mercury.” The expression in the context of the scene is a sexual advance. Paul suggests that his own queerness gives him a greater insight into Freddie’s identity, a greater claim to personal “knowledge” than anyone else. Later in the film, Paul has inveigled himself to become Freddie’s gatekeeper by encouraging his hedonistic impulses and plying him with drugs and alcohol. When Freddie attempts to extricate himself from his influence, Paul tries to blackmail him, implying he will reveal information about Freddie’s private vices to the press. He repeats the line “I know you,” this time as a threat. This rhyming use of dialogue reveals much about the film’s ambivalent representation of Mercury’s sexuality. It implies that to know Freddie is to understand his desires, his sexual identity, and that this in turn is to threaten his control over his persona.

In the final dialogue sequence of the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*’s Freddie reveals his HIV positive status to the rest of his bandmates. He also tells them he refuses to become an “AIDS poster boy, their cautionary tale.” Instead, he says, “I’m going to be what I was born to be: a performer, who gives the public what they want.” This line, an expression of identity that emphasizes externality, neatly encapsulates the film’s approach to Freddie Mercury. It recreates his persona but declines to explore his person. In this interpretation, the persona is the “real” Mercury. This is in contrast with most biopics, which acknowledge the co-existence of person and persona, and the predominant reality claim of the person. The conclusion of *Rocketman* is more confident in its declaration of identity. In the penultimate scene of the film, a fantasy scenario plays out in Elton’s therapy group, in which visions of the key people in his life—his parents, grandmother, ex-partner,

lyricist and finally, his childhood self—help him to work through his past. They engage in a dialogue about Elton’s identity, in which his ex-partner John Reid (Richard Madden) sneers “He doesn’t know who he is.” Elton corrects him: “Yes I do. I’m Elton Hercules John.” This simple re-statement of identity returns the viewer to the film’s beginning, an act of circular storytelling that conforms to classical narrative structures and achieves a sense of coherence and closure. Reggie then challenges him “I thought you were Reggie Dwight.” This exchange is captured in the shot/reverse-shot structure discussed above, returning to the motif of Elton/Reggie as the conflict between persona and person. Reggie then repeats the earlier line of dialogue “When are you going to hug me?” and they embrace, the camera circling them to show their satisfied, smiling faces, as person and persona finally align. Elton John’s participation in the film, though apparently at a distance, rhetorically authorizes *Rocketman*’s replication of person and persona, producing a version of the subject that, for all its overt artifice, has a clear perspective on the identity of its subject.

Reading the biopic through the lens of persona enables an analysis of biographical storytelling that focuses on questions of authenticity. Many biopics explore the dynamic relationship between public persona and private individual, implying that the latter is the “authentic” version of the individual, the “real” person behind the star image. *Rocketman* is typical of this approach, to the extent that it indulges in the well-worn trope in rock biography of the suffering of the individual at the hands of their famous alter-ego. Its framing within the narrative conceit of therapeutic “working through,” and the license its creative team had to author both the persona and the person of Elton John work together to

Fig. 8: In a press conference, Freddie's tussle with the press over exploitation of his persona is dramatized through fish-eye lens images of a phalanx of journalists. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018).

create a “first person” style biography. It achieves a sense of authenticity through authorization, through implying, however playfully, that this is the “true” story of the truest part of Elton John, his inner self. *Bohemian Rhapsody* eschews deep exploration of the person, adopting instead a dramatization of how Queen and Freddie Mercury constructed their public personas and forged a musical legacy. It achieves authenticity through close approximation, a faithful

replica of its subject. Unable to appeal to Mercury’s authorization, the account is mediated through the eyes of those who knew him, people who the film presents as an audience for Freddie’s perpetual performance of self. Given Mercury’s known protectiveness about his personal life and identity, perhaps this was indeed the best way for the film to “protect his legacy” as May puts it. The result is a film that reproduces the persona, a fictionalization of a fiction.

1/ In reality, the “John” in Elton John was borrowed from blues singer Long John Baldry, his early mentor.

2/ Freddie Mercury’s singing voice was produced by using vocal stems from the recordings of Queen’s songs, supplemented by recordings of Canadian rock singer Marc Martel, who delivers a close approximation of Mercury’s vocal style.

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