

ASSANGE AND WIKILEAKS: SECRETS, PERSONAS AND THE ETHOPOETICS OF DIGITAL LEAKING

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests a rhetorical orientation for future work in persona studies. In this paper, I maintain that persona studies can usefully contribute to the close description of complexes of discursive events. In particular, I contend that persona studies can enhance efforts in the humanities to describe discursive events involving public figures who have achieved a degree of fame or notoriety. The descriptive purchase of persona studies is maximised, I argue, when we foreground its rhetorical and semiotic postulates.

To make this case, I read the figure of Julian Assange rhetorically. By focussing on questions of ethos and ethopoesis – the performative, discursive construction of full human character – I show that Julian Assange can be usefully read as a particular, digitally inflected instantiation of the persona of the information activist.

In this instance, persona studies helps us to read the constitutive relation between digital leaking and issues of secrecy and publicity, and to understand the fortunes of the figure of Julian Assange in terms of Assange's particular performance of the persona of the digital information activist.

KEY WORDS

Assange; WikiLeaks; secrecy; leaking; whistleblowing; rhetoric; genre; semiotics; information activism; persona; persona studies

This article aims to indicate one orientation for future work in 'persona studies'. I want to suggest herein that this emerging field of inquiry can usefully contribute to efforts in the humanities to closely describe complexes of discursive events, particularly those involving public figures who have achieved some fame or notoriety. I hope to show that the descriptive purchase of persona studies is maximised when we foreground its rhetorical and semiotic postulates. To do so, I will focus on questions of *ethos* and *ethopoesis*, the performative, discursive construction of full human character.

In order to make this case, I will take as an example the rich object of analysis that is Julian Assange and the secure and anonymous whistleblowing organisation and website he co-founded in 2006 and edits, WikiLeaks. I will construe the figure of Assange as a performance or

instantiation of a particular contemporary *persona*, that of the *digital information activist*. I will argue that in the case of Assange, the persona of the information activist is both constituted and complicated—compromised, even—by the ethopoetics of digital leaking, which is inextricably tied to questions of *character capital*, of *publicity* and of *secrecy*.

Before addressing these last, however, allow me some qualifying remarks about persona and persona studies, and a couple of comments about secrets and secrecy. Evidently, “persona” is a sign that has long stood for a range of objects. From a mask to differentiate characters on the classical stage to a heuristic device in intellectual history (see Hunter), the term persona has been mobilised in a range of disciplines and spheres of activity. In this paper, I will not rehearse these varied uses of persona. I will, however, touch on some of the themes that tend to recur when notions of persona are put to work: the dramaturgical analogies; the entanglements of figures of the public and the private; the intrications of achieved and attributed celebrity (Rojek *Celebrity*; Drake & Miah; Turner); the interrelations of the topoi of self-present, voluntaristic subjects and socially constructed agency. While none of these themes maps fully onto its others, I take it that all bear substantive relations to ethopoesis. *Ethopoeia*, Carolyn Miller reminds us,

is the ancient Greek term for the creation of character. This term focuses directly on the constructions we make from the least clue that suggests the presence of another mind; it also reminds us that these attributions are not of rationality alone but of full human character (Miller 268).

Persona studies is as multifarious as the diverse uses to which persona has been put. As the inaugural issue of this journal attests, persona studies is an emerging set of inquiries that draws on the methods and attends to the objects of cultural and sociological analyses from media to celebrity studies. In what follows, I will neither trace a genealogy of this nascent field nor try to review its burgeoning range of analyses. I will, however, take it as given that many of the interdisciplinary moves to which persona studies has recourse are either eminently rhetorical and semiotic, or germane to semio-rhetorical inquiry. What, for example, is Erving Goffman’s (1959) sociological construct of the presentation of self—wherein a person by means of her actions projects a definition of a situation with a view to determining in her interlocutors a particular responsive conduct—if not a semio-rhetorical construal of character or persona as critical to determining discursive uptake? (Put in the distinctly rhetorical terms of Peircean semiosis, the person qua interpreter participates in the translative process whereby signs “displace one another and are transformed” [Freadman xxvi]: her actions constitute a sign [*representamen*] which takes up or represents a previous sign [*object*] and in so doing works to determine a further sign [the first sign’s uptake or *interpretant* effect - in this case, the interlocutor’s particular responsive conduct].) Rhetorical postulates similarly subtend issues of exposure management and achieved and attributed celebrity, which are live questions for persona studies. With these rhetorical and semiotic presuppositions in mind—and recalling that Assange construes leaking as necessarily corrective of governmental-corporate corruption and productive of transparency—let us canvass some issues concerning secrets and secrecy.

In a practical sense, we are all experts on secrets. We all interpret information and the blockings and branchings—the concealings and revealings—of information flows. We are all involved in confidences entrusted, kept, forgotten, and betrayed. My point here is a simple one—an open secret if you will—a point familiar to semiotics and rhetoric, to public relations and folk psychology, namely that chains of interpretants entail chains of interpreters,¹ that the spoken presumes a postulate of the speaker, and that we value information in relation to the *ethos*—the character capital, the credibility or authority—that we assign to the information’s source. In this paper, I hope to show that this is clearly the case in respect of Assange and WikiLeaks.

For many of us, questions of secrecy are tied to our sense of the “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) of the present: the fourth estate today fairly “pulses with invocations of the secret” (Dean 2002, 1). Arguably, secrecy’s particular currency now is due, at least in part, to events involving Assange and WikiLeaks. As a whistleblowing platform, WikiLeaks is enabled and constrained by its ability to take, to keep, to break, or to leak secrets. A significant precondition of this ability is the technical capacity of its infrastructure precisely to separate information received from the information’s source. But an ability to leak—and to do so under political and financial pressure, transnationally (Shirky)—in no way determines the efficacy of the leaking’s uptake. Leaking requires the postulate of a leaker, the ethopoetical appraisal of whom inflects our evaluations of the information leaked. Arguably, the first question asked of a gunship video, purportedly from an AH-64 Apache helicopter in Iraq, is that of its authenticity. However, issues of legitimacy soon sort with those of authenticity as characterological questions—concerning motive, office and credibility—are posed of the persons and platforms publishing the footage. Plainly, leaking is more than a mechanical process.

In the case of Assange and WikiLeaks, the human hues of leaking are equally apparent if we turn in the semiotic chain of secret spilling to the whistleblower as nominal origin or source. A constitutive tension for Assange here goes unsaid: materially dependent on submissions, WikiLeaks is legally reliant on the separation of the submission from its all too human source. The architecture per se is not at issue here: WikiLeaks’ submission system would appear to be technically secure. Rather, the concern is one of ethos: of trust, discernment, and reputation. This last was famously compromised when the neglected source, former U.S. soldier Private First Class Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning, acted on what Georg Simmel calls the temptation that “accompanies the psychical life of the secret” (466): she confessed her document dump to ex-hacker Adrian Lamo. Notoriously, Lamo betrayed Manning’s confidence by leaking in turn to U.S. federal authorities and to the press.² In this sense, then, the sociability of secrets cannot be contained by building a better secret-spilling machine. Evidently, the case of Assange and WikiLeaks is perfused with questions of character capital, publicity and secrecy. In this article, however, I can only touch on a few of the entanglements of person, persona and project by reading the figure of Assange in terms of the ethopoetics of digital leaking.

To do so, I ask the question—time-worn since at least 2010—of *Who is Julian Assange?*³ At first blush, this query elicits a straightforward biographical or psychological response. To take it up in terms of the semio-rhetorical problem of *ethos*, however, is to attend to the situations and occasions in relation to which the question arises, and the partisan uses to which the question is put. For our purposes, I note two things in this respect. First, the question of *Who is Assange?* invites an interrogation of the formation of a particular type of discursive persona. Second, interventions in the various biographical genres—or rather, in biographical mode—provide a privileged site off which to read the constitution of this persona of the digital information activist.

To be clear, I take “biographical” here broadly to denote the representation of the life or the interpretation of the actions of an individual, where an “individual” is an intentional, responsible agent subsisting over discursive spheres, time and space (Rorty). Similarly, I take “mode” adjectivally as “a thematic and tonal qualification or ‘colouring’ of genre” (Frow 67). On this construal, a report of Assange’s actions or utterances, a profile piece in the mainstream press, a biopic or—perhaps more controversially—a fictionalised spy-thriller loosely taking Assange as subject, are so many interventions in this capacious “biographical mode”. Certainly, a dizzying array of partisan interests invests in these interventions. But from a focus on Assange’s threadbare socks and crumpled suits to the charges of having blood on his hands, from his epic wanderings through Milnet and exploits as a young hacker to his infamous attempts to gag his

own colleagues, from the fabulations to the disabusing commentaries, this agonistic process reads as so many moments in the contested and ongoing contouring of a persona: so many moments shaping the reception of Assange's performance of the digital information activist.

Who, then, is the man who spilled the secrets?⁴ Before essaying a response, a further word is in order about how we take secrets, given the constitutive relation I am positing between secrecy and Assange's performance of the persona of the digital information activist.

From sociology (Simmel) to cultural studies and literary theory (Birchall; Derrida & Ferraris), various human sciences have attended, periodically, to secrecy. I take it, however, that an intervention from moral philosophy—Sissela Bok's *Secrets On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*—neatly synthesises and anticipates much of the substantive work on secrecy to date. Just as Simmel describes secrecy as "consciously willed concealment" (449), so Bok notes that "anything can be a secret, so long as it is kept intentionally hidden, set apart in the mind of its keeper and requiring concealment" (5). Broadly, she takes

concealment, or hiding, to be the defining trait of secrecy. It presupposes separation, a setting apart of the secret from the non-secret, and of keepers of a secret from those excluded. The Latin *secretum* carries this meaning of something hidden, set apart. It derives from *secernere*, which originally meant to sift apart, to separate as with a sieve. It bespeaks discernment, the ability to make distinctions, to sort out and draw lines ... The separation between insider and outsider is inherent in secrecy; and to think something secret is already to envisage potential conflict between what insiders conceal and outsiders want to inspect or lay bare (Bok 6).

Bok uses the topic of secrets to make an intradisciplinary point about the position of ethics within philosophy. I take her equally to be making a semio-rhetorical one: that questions of concealment and revelation, of exclusion and inclusion, of borders, tact, and discernment, are the stuff of both mediated information flow and of *ethopoiesis*, the performative, discursive construction of full human character. Significantly, neither Bok nor Simmel loads secrecy with ethically negative, pathogenic connotations: because concealment is multiply productive, secrecy per se "has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents" (Simmel 463). Correlatively, transparency is not always or necessarily good. The achievement of the good at which some actions aim can require a modicum of concealment, albeit temporarily—take, for example, a digital whistleblowing start-up like WikiLeaks which in its embryonic stages could hardly afford to show its hand or raise its head.

So who is Julian Assange? "Information messiah or cyber-terrorist? Freedom fighter or sociopath? Moral crusader or deluded narcissist?" ask David Leigh and Luke Harding (14) in their "insider" account of their time as journalists at the *Guardian* collaborating with Assange and WikiLeaks. The characterisations are countless, but the problem is hardly a wicked one: how we take up the question and its dichotomies depends on our situated and situating standpoints. To the Metropolitan police staked out at the Ecuadorian embassy, for example, Assange is at the time of writing a beneficiary of political asylum, but not of diplomatic immunity. To the disgruntled executive editor of the *New York Times*, whose collaboration with WikiLeaks—like that of the *Guardian* and of so many others—ended acrimoniously, Assange was always and only a source (Keller 4). To Assange's legal counsel in the United States, by contrast, Assange must be a journalist, editor, or downstream publisher if he is to avail himself of state shield laws or mount a First Amendment defence (Allen; Bencher; Thebes).

But the question of *Who is Assange?* is raised in other rhetorical spheres of activity—in the highly mediated courts of public opinion, for instance, where the achieving and attribution

of celebrity are faced with different, sometimes more diffuse, structural constraints. Assange himself, of course, promotes a manifest-destiny line of response: following his fabled persecuted youth, he is assigned a millennial mission, a “duty to history” which he sets about discharging via WikiLeaks, that rising “new star in the political firmament of humanity”.⁵ Such overwrought pronouncements are in fact matched by some of the partisan hyperbole: think Andrew Fowler’s (2011) *The Most Dangerous Man in the World (The Explosive True Story of Julian Assange and the Lies, Cover-Ups, and Conspiracies He Exposed)*. Echoing Henry Kissinger’s epithet for Daniel Ellsberg, Fowler adds the strapline—well before the publication of Edward Snowden’s trove of National Security Agency leaks—“How One Hacker Ended Corporate and Government Secrecy Forever.”

Messianic rhetorics aside, the question of *Who is Assange?* admittedly makes for compelling copy. On the facts, it is blessed with “all the earmarks of the greatest journalism story since Watergate”: it is one, notes John Cook on reviewing a raft of Assange-WikiLeaks memoirs, “that ought to make for a few good books and a film adaptation or two.” From his youthful hacker exploits in the “veiled world” of the 1990s computer underground “populated by characters slipping in and out of the half-darkness” (Dreyfus 42) to his trip to Ellingham Hall disguised as an old lady (Leigh & Harding 13), from the unsubstantiated claims of the ambushing of a WikiLeaks staffer in a Luxembourg carpark (WikiLeaks *Transcript*) to having the bushes swept for assassins (O’Hagan), from the speaking in hushed tones and recourse to cryptophones to the intermittent use of bulletproof vests, the cloak and dagger and techno-spy thriller genres—with their tropes of paranoia, surveillance and conspiracy—fairly impose themselves. But aside from creating copy, the question of *Who is Assange?* matters heuristically if we allow for its role in the constitution of a persona: to us, at this juncture, the figure of Assange is first and foremost an instantiation of a type.

Let us briefly recall here one of Assange’s less contentious epithets: the designator “Julian Assange” sits easily with the descriptor of digital “information activist.” Indeed, Assange uncontroversially self-identifies as such (Moss). For our purposes, the term *information activist* denotes a particular persona, where we take *persona* to be somewhat akin to what Elizabeth Fowler (1992; 2003) calls a “social person”—a personification of a social paradigm, a speaking position grown out of a series of social practices; put otherwise, a character established through repeated discursive use. We could equally consider a persona to resemble a “kind of person,” in the sense in which Ian Hacking’s analyses of the constitution of human kinds put the term to work. As such, the persona of the information activist is never really settled, an abstracted type emergent from and responsive to a complexus of institutional, technical, sociopolitical, historical, rhetorical and personal determinants.

If we take up the figure of Assange as a particular digitally-inflected variant or instantiation of the type of persona that is the information activist, then it follows that to read Assange ethopoetically is to attend to the commonalities and points of distinction between the figure of Assange and other tokens of the information activist. This follows because, as Anne Freadman’s reading of Charles Sanders Peirce’s type/token distinction makes plain, a token is a sign—an interpretation or representation—of a type. As the “outcome of a translation,” a type is an ideal object inferred or yielded “by abstraction from a series of particular occurrences” (Freadman 157-58). These particular occurrences or tokens necessarily share some formal properties, but differ in their local particularities. Tokens, in other words, work as contingent translations of types.

Let me, then, signal some broad commonalities before identifying a couple of particularities or exemplary points at which Assange’s performance negatively distinguishes

itself from that of other instantiations of the information activist. Briefly, we could describe the persona of the information activist as exercised by a version or versions of information freedom; it voices commitments of various liberal stripes to access and transparency, more often than not subscribing to a hacker ethos of information wanting to be free. In the case of Assange, this is qualified, problematically, by the cypherpunk watchword of “privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful” (Assange *Cypherpunks* 7), and combined with a scientific, information-theoretic conception of social interaction, information flow and agency.⁶

Many things, situations and circumstances go to make up the persona of the digital information activist. In the case of Assange, some of these more salient elements range from a Commodore 64 to the hacking subculture of the 1980s and 1990s, from the fibre optic underpinnings of the internet to the cypherpunk movement, remailers and the affordances of public-key cryptography, from a post-9/11 environment of expanding secrecy and sharing to jurisdictional difference, the legal instruments and diplomatic protocols mobilised by state actors in performances of national sovereignty, and so on. The digital information activist claims lineages in analogue whistleblowing and anti-censorship activities; in the case of Assange, it achieves a certain fame by combining some high-profile document leaks with the assumption of a parrhesiastic, truth-telling position in relation to government and corporate entities, which it subsumes in the figure of the colluding, corrupted state. One characteristic of this persona as performed or personified by Assange is precisely its constitutive but contradictory relation to the topoi of secrecy; another is that it is peculiarly structured by its relation to WikiLeaks, of which Assange becomes the face.

One could, of course, object that the question of *Who is Assange?* will be answered in due course by something called posterity: that the measure of the man will lie in his long-term impact, and that speculation is all too premature at this point. However, in a pragmatic, semio-rhetorical sense, part of Assange’s legacy concerns precisely the ethopoetical issues foregrounded by his performance of the persona of the digital information activist, in particular by the compromising confluences effected therein between person, persona, and transparency project.

Undoubtedly, the interventions of Assange and WikiLeaks have helped to refashion rhetorical public spheres, to overhaul the dynamics of whistleblowing, and to provoke reflection on the situation, functions and operations of an increasingly networked fourth estate. A tentative appraisal of Assange’s journalistic and activist legacies, however, is beyond our present remit. For now, my point is simply that such assessments, much like the talk of WikiLeaks’ flatlining or being “on life support” (Greenberg 4), are haunted by the spectre of Assange. Such are the entanglements of questions of actions and of character in the case of Assange; such are the confluences of the public and the private in his respect. Such, in other words, are the rhetorical expectations brought to bear on Assange’s performance of the persona of the digital information activist, that assessments of his legacy can hardly prescind from reading the figure of Assange ethopoetically: we value information in relation to the character capital that we assign to the information’s source.

Rhetorically, it is understandable but misguided to lament a media focus on the “personalities of WikiLeaks.” (It is equally unhelpful to dismiss the focus on Assange as the asymmetrical, ad hominem attacks of a vindictive and venal fourth estate doing the bidding of an internationalised, terminally corrupted government-corporate complex.) The exhortation to “separate the man from the cause” (Brooke), to “step away from the persons” to see the “broader achievement of WikiLeaks” (Jónsdóttir 4) is admirable, but suffers a peculiar blindness. The elision of particular human actors ignores the pragmatic sense in which

whistleblowing and secret leaking are constitutively tied to spectacles of personalised publicity, with their attendant imputations of motives and character calls. Neither whistleblowing nor leaking is reducible to the mechanics of digital information flows; both are eminently human matters, and their discursive mediation invariably demands a human face. (Again, and concomitantly, anonymity in such undertakings is enabling, but only temporarily: sooner or later, the exposure on whistleblowing platforms of corrupt fiduciary relations entrains questions about the trust invested in, and the accountabilities of, the information's exposing source.)

Filed talking to Mark Davis for his documentary, *The Whistleblower*, while being made up to appear on Swedish television, Assange explains that WikiLeaks "needs a face." Back then, Sweden was friendly legal and promotional ground for Assange. Davis provides some context, noting in voiceover that Assange is "stepping forward to promote the Iraq video." Certainly, *Collateral Murder*, the tendentiously titled edit of a classified US Apache gunship video released on 5 April 2010, marks the point at which WikiLeaks went viral, or at least became a household name in the United States. "The public demands," continues Assange, "that WikiLeaks has [sic] a face. And actually we'd much sort of prefer, I'd prefer it if it didn't have a face ... [but] people just started inventing faces." With growing exposure, Assange concedes that WikiLeaks needs a character—an ethos, a speaking position, a mask or persona. To act effectively as a mouthpiece, WikiLeaks needs a face. Assange is at pains to appear reluctant to personify the organisation here, but he will later rush to entangle the WikiLeaks project with his person and persona, thereby risking irreparable damage to his character capital and moral authority.

As Assange assumes the face of WikiLeaks, it becomes increasingly apparent that there are some presentational, ethopoetical steps for the secret spiller to take and, correlatively, some to avoid. Again, biographical interventions taking up the question of *Who is Assange?*, and interventions in biographical mode more broadly, are critically important here. From beans-spilling memoirs and 'insider' accounts to television documentaries, biopics and fictionalised techno spy-thrillers, from mainstream press profiles to the unauthorised official autobiography, such discursive interventions provide a privileged point from which to read Assange's ethopoetical missteps.⁷

I will not itemise the moments of outrage, the umbrage taken and the explicit and implicit critiques that these materials—from the vindictive to the hagiographic—level at Assange. Rather, I will simply point to a couple of interrelated, contentious points in these narratives at which Assange's character capital is compromised, and indicate the suasive inadequacy of Assange and WikiLeaks' response. These points of contention involve evaluations of Assange's handling of the issues of redaction and of sexual assault; another, for instance, would be that of WikiLeaks' lack of organisational transparency. Assange's actions in these respects, I suggest, constitute so many ethopoetical missteps. Plainly, these instances of reputation mismanagement are instructive, as they comprise an important moment in the coming into being of the persona of the digital information activist. Properly scrutinised, these critical points form part of a feedback loop, informing future inflections or performances of the persona or type of the leaking information activist. (Think Snowden, whose performance to date, *mutatis mutandis*, has been decidedly cannier and more astute than that of Assange as digital information activist.)

Plainly, Assange is alive to the promotional potential of biographical work; we count among his early autobiographical forays his discontinued blog at iq.org and his contribution to Dreyfus's *Underground: Hacking, madness and obsession on the electronic frontier*. (While Assange is credited with supplying the research for *Underground*, the anecdotes therein

concerning Mendax, Assange's online handle in his early hacker days, bear his distinct editorial imprint.) However, while content to have himself "fashioned his life into a fable" (Manne), Assange notoriously taxes nearly all biographical interventions in his respect as misrepresentative or defamatory. His vociferous objections and attempts to suppress publication are an ineffective counter-messaging; they sit especially uneasily with the figure of Assange as radical transparency advocate.

Take, for example, his unofficial autobiography, ghosted by Andrew O'Hagan and published by Canongate (Assange and O'Hagan). Faced with sexual assault allegations raised in Sweden and needing to fund his legal defence, Assange eagerly accepted and promptly spent a handsome advance for this project. Initially, he appeared enthusiastic, expressing the slightly inflated hope that the work would become "one of the unifying documents of our generation" (ABC). However, he later reneged on the contract, objecting that the book "was meant to be about my life's struggle for justice through access to knowledge. It has turned into something else" (WikiLeaks *Statement*). Noting Assange's conclusion in this regard that 'all memoir is prostitution', George Brock muses wryly that "this may be the first hint ever dropped by the founder of WikiLeaks that there can be such a thing as too much publicity. Or it could be an oblique acknowledgement that this autobiography does not meet his wish to be respected as a master of the universe".

Indeed, tropes of arrogance and of a lack of discernment and empathy recur in anecdotes about Assange. Plainly, his disregard for collaborators—from his financial supporters to his legal teams to his mainstream media partners, whom he presumes to manipulate like a master puppeteer and with whom relations have invariably turned toxic, to his own WikiLeaks colleagues, whom he has variously menaced, gagged or summarily dismissed—is legendary (Keller; O'Hagan; Ball; Domschiet-Berg). In brief, Assange's conduct, his performance of the persona of the digital information activist, is one to which charges of hubris readily stick.

It could be urged that charges of hubris be dismissed as merely the ad hominem smears and ravings of rejected and spiteful malcontents. This would neglect the ethopoetical point that the performative intrications of person and persona help to constitute the project of secret leaking. Hubris is a damaging charge to level here, and it can be shown to pertain in at least two respects: hubris maps to the issue of redaction in the case of Assange, and it is plainly at work in his uptake of the allegations of sexual assault. I will mention each briefly in turn.

Following *Collateral Murder*, Assange and WikiLeaks instigated a series of sensational disclosures based on Manning's trove: the Afghan War Logs, Iraq War Logs, and Cablegate releases. These leaks marked a major collaboration between Assange and WikiLeaks and selected mainstream media outlets. Evidently, the collaboration was notoriously fraught; one of the major sticking points was the issue of redaction, which saw Assange's radical transparency agenda ranged against the institutional constraints, moral imperatives, and the ethopoetical expertise of certain members of the fourth estate who insisted on redacting identifying details not to avoid causing embarrassment, but rather, to try to avoid imperilling human life. As the 2010 disclosures made mainstream headlines and Assange achieved rockstar fame, imputations of callousness— of a lack of tact or discernment, a lack of empathetic imagination, what Stanley Cavell would call a "soul-blindness" (378)—started to stick. Redaction—what we withhold, that secret of secrets—emerged as a dilemma of office, a point of professional integrity and discretion, where this last connotes, precisely, the "capacity to exercise judgment about secrecy" (Bok 41). On this subject, Assange showed himself to be by turns disdainful or equivocal. Assange's initial refusal of, and later ambivalence toward, harm minimisation—bluntly and

effectively conveyed by the “blood on his hands” topos—play inextricably into the charge of hubris, indelibly marking his performance of the persona of the digital information activist.⁸

Hubris is also a precondition of, and further evinced by, Assange’s missteps in relation to the sexual assault claims made in Sweden - hubris, and Assange’s unrelenting cultivation of a paranoid spy logic. As a complexus of discursive events, the sex assault allegations present a constitutive problem for Assange’s digital information activist. Responding to the allegations with talk of honey traps, Assange moves fully to conflate WikiLeaks with his private and legal persona, attempting to reframe a sex offence case as one of freedom of speech. Moreover, he then reacts furiously to *The Guardian’s* publication of confidential information relating to the case. Vendetta or not, Assange is seen to refuse the responsibilities and accountabilities entailed in personification, the assumption of a face (Davies; Kahn; Leigh and Harding; O’Hagan). Much like his gagging of WikiLeaks staffers, or the proprietary attitude he adopts towards the information for which he claims to be the conduit, this positioning of his person, his persona, and his project as floating above the law sits ill with the avowed transparency commitments of the digital information activist.

By way of a conclusion, I commend to you Alex Gibney’s *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks* for its teasing out of some of the ethopoetical threads comprising the fabric of the case of Assange and WikiLeaks. Assange and WikiLeaks roundly condemned *We Steal Secrets* before, during and after its release. On this account, a spiteful Gibney, unable to secure an interview with Assange, engages in vindictive character assassination, producing a self-indulgent hatchet job comprising defamatory editorial sleights of hand and indefensible ad hominem muckraking. Certainly, Gibney’s work is not beyond reproach, but neither is it without real merit. Detailed discussion of his film, however, will have to be deferred: suffice it for now to note that Assange’s objections follow a familiar hyperbolic logic: Gibney is cast as spurned lover to Assange, who is presumptively framed as everyone’s love object.

We Steal Secrets reads as a documentary with a decidedly tragic narrative arc, at least in its coverage of Assange. Briefly, and doubtless reductively, we could describe the ethopoetical tale sketched therein as that of an individual whose technical mastery of digital information flows enables him to commodify secrets. In the process, he accrues a certain celebrity capital (Driessens). This capital is squandered, however—and the whistleblowing project compromised—as Assange’s selective radical transparency agenda, cultivation of rockstar status, swelling hubris, penchant for paranoia and general soul-blindness distract him from attending to the sociability of secrets as integral to digital secret leaking.

Arguably, Julian Assange and WikiLeaks are formed by and under the sign of the secret. Assange’s particular personification of the digital information activist, suggests that information flows are not the sole province of informatics; that the spilling of secrets is not merely a question of data packages, onion routers and public-key cryptography: digital leaking concerns the discursive performances of personae, and is a messy, and eminently human, ethopoetical activity.

¹ On the importance of attending to purposive interpreters in relation to interpretants in Peircean semiosis, see Freadman (2004); Lyne (1980); Munro (2012); Short (2007).

² Bracketing out legal considerations, Fowler (2011, 137), for example, speculates on the costliness of Assange and WikiLeaks’ distancing of their source, surmising that Manning ‘had been pushed to one side by Assange and felt increasingly

isolated ... if Manning had not felt so alone he may not have started his internet 'confession' to Lamo'. See also, e.g., Gibney in O'Hehir (2013); Greenberg (2012, 14-46); Leigh & Harding (2011, 72-89).

³ 2010 was a year of high profile releases for WikiLeaks: Collateral Murder, Afghan War Logs, Iraq War Logs, Cablegate. See, e.g., Brevini et al. (2013).

⁴ Like almost everything else here, the 'secret' nature of WikiLeaks' revelations is contested: Luke Harding (2014, 146), for example, claims that 'just 6 per cent' of the Wikileaks 2010 disclosures sourced from Manning 'were classified at the relatively modest level of 'secret'.'

⁵ On Assange's fabled youth, see, e.g., Khatchadourian (2010); Dreyfus (2001); Leigh & Harding (2011); Assange/O'Hagan (2011); on his 'duty to history', see, e.g., Burns & Somaiya (2011, 35); on WikiLeaks as the 'new star in the political firmament of humanity', see Manne (2011).

⁶ Plainly, Anonymous is significant here. On Assange and Anonymous as belonging to the 'same family' of digitally based politics, and on the need to compare their 'different faces', see Coleman (2011). Such a comparison, however, is beyond the scope of our present paper. For a detailed rhetorico-ethnographic reading of the 'lulzy' ethics, politics and aesthetics of Anonymous, see Coleman (2014). For Assange's appeals to 'information flow', see Assange (2012; 2014).

⁷ For 'insider' accounts, see, e.g., Domscheit-Berg (2011); Dreyfus (2001); Leigh & Harding (2011). For documentaries, biopics and films, see, e.g., Condon (2013); Connolly (2012); Davis (2010; 2010); Gibney (2013). For profile pieces, see, e.g., Cook (2011); Ellison (2011); Khatchadourian (2010); Manne (2011); O'Hagan (2014); Rourke et al. (2012); Wallace-Wells (2014). For the unauthorised official autobiography, see Assange/O'Hagan (2011).

⁸ Letting aside the controversy around the mass unredacted Cablegate dump, the Afghanistan files proved particularly contentious. On the issue of redaction, note the positioning of Nick Davies of *The Guardian* in Gibney (2013): 'This problem - potential problem - had already come up. (a) It's a moral problem. We are not here to publish material that gets people killed; (b) If you publish information that really does get people hurt, or could conceivably get people hurt, you lose your political immunity - you're terribly vulnerable to the most obvious propaganda attack, which is waiting for us in the wings, that you are helping the 'bad guys''.' See also, e.g., Bellia (2012); Burns & Somaiya (2010); Ellison (2011); Gibney (2013); Keller (2011); O'Hagan (2014); Leigh & Harding (2011).

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