PERSONA AND REBELLION IN TRICKSTER NARRATIVES. CASE STUDY: FLEABAG (BBC 2016-2019)

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together the concept of persona and the figure of the trickster to examine the dynamic between social norms and creative noncompliance, between the social mask and human authenticity, in moving image narratives. In particular, it looks at the female trickster challenging the female persona in recent television shows, primarily BBC's Fleabag *(2016-2019), using the previously outlined framework of trickster attributes (Bassil-Morozow 2012; Bassil-Morozow 2015).*

The concept of persona is examined using a combination of Erving Goffman's presentation of self theory and Jung's persona concept. It is argued that the female persona – the artificial vision of socially acceptable femininity – is a particularly rigid psycho-social structure, comprising repressive and unrealistic expectations for women's looks, bodies, and conduct in public situations. Using the nameless protagonist of Fleabag as a case study, the paper shows how the female trickster can challenge these prescribed attributes and expectations while defying the individual-controlling techniques: shame, social embarrassment, social rejection and ostracism.

KEY WORDS

Female Trickster; Persona; *Fleabag;* Jung; Goffman; Social Mask

PERSONA AND REBELLION IN TRICKSTER NARRATIVES. CASE STUDY: *FLEABAG* (BBC 2016-2019)

This paper brings together the concept of persona and the figure of the trickster to examine the dynamic between social norms and creative noncompliance, between the social mask and human authenticity, in moving image narratives. In particular, it looks at the female trickster challenging the female persona in recent television shows, primarily BBC's *Fleabag* (2016-20192019), using the previously outlined framework of trickster attributes (Bassil-Morozow 2012; Bassil-Morozow 2015). Application of trickster features and the introduction of the specifically female social mask provide a new angle on the multidisciplinary concept of persona. Meanwhile, the trickster theory also benefits from the inclusion of Erving Goffman's analysis of social performance which shows off the trickster's disdain for the artificiality of accepted social values.

Trickster narratives can be found in different media, from myth and folk tales to literature, film and TV. They typically depict a protagonist losing face (accidentally or

deliberately), entering a period of turmoil, and emerging out of it with a changed status. The link between the trickster and persona seems natural. After all, at the core of a trickster narrative is the disruption of the order of things and erasure of the official mask worn by the individual in their everyday interaction with society. This mask is discussed here using a combination of Carl Jung's concept of persona and Erving Goffman's performance theory. Both are transposed onto the trickster narrative arch to explore the trickster's relationship with all things orderly, lawful, and official.

Importantly, persona is also a gendered concept. This article focuses on the female trickster because persona requirements have been traditionally more potent for women in many societies, with additional prescriptions for etiquette, dress code, make-up, body language, and taboo topics. The contrast between the persona and the female trickster is therefore particularly stark, and their conflict is doubly antagonistic (as well as funny).

The emergence of the rebellious, unruly, and chaotic female protagonist in recent television narratives, including *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW/Netflix; 2015-2018), *Disenchantment* (Netflix 2018-), *Killing Eve* (BBC 2018-), and *Fleabag* (BBC 2016-20192019), signal that the female trickster has fast becoming accepted into the genre. It signals a social shift, and shows that there is a demand for a new type of female character, the one who does not conform to the traditional vision of what it means to be a woman; a character who is not afraid to challenge the norms and to make change happen. Phoebe Waller-Bridge's chaotic nameless protagonist is one of the more prominent female tricksters because of her ability to uncover the embarrassments, errors, and genuine emotions underneath the smooth surface of the persona.

PERSONA: DEFINITIONS

According to Jung, the persona is constructed to look like a coherent identity to the outside world yet it is a "segment of the collective psyche", and "a mask that *feigns individuality,* making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks" (Jung CW7, para. 245). The persona is not to be confused with what Jung calls "ego-consciousness" - one's personal identity parts of which an individual may choose to shield from society. By contrast, the persona is "that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is" (CW 9/I, para. 221).

A persona often takes the form of a carefully cultivated image projected to the outside world. Even though it is a necessary part of social adaptation, this image can easily become a trap when its wearer becomes excessively concerned with success and acceptance. Jung writes:

> When we analyse the persona we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective; in other words, that the persona was only a mask of the collective psyche. Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, exercises a function, he is this or that. In a certain sense all this is real, yet in relation to the essential individuality of the person concerned it is only a secondary reality, a compromise formation, in making which others often have a greater share than he. The persona is a semblance, a two-dimensional reality, to give it a nickname. (CW7, para. 246)

Erving Goffman employs terms such as facework, deference, demeanour, embarrassment, stigma, alienation from interaction, communication boundaries, situational proprieties, and other terms to describe the intricacies of the interaction ritual and public behaviour. Unlike the psychoanalytic tradition, Goffman is not interested in the authentic self versus the public self dichotomy, but only in the ritual interactions between people, which he calls "the ritual roles of

the self" (Goffman 2005, p. 31). Neither is he interested in origins and development of an authentic personality which would then go on to have an ongoing, repressed conflict with authority.

Instead, Goffman defines the self as "an image pieced together from the expressive indications of the full flow of events in an undertaking; and the self as a kind of player in a ritual game who copes honourably or dishonourably, diplomatically or undiplomatically, with the judgemental contingencies of the situation" (2005, p. 31). In other words, to the outside world, which in most cases has no time for exploring personalities and individualities, what really matters is one's ability to participate in the 'game'. Anyone unable or unwilling to participate in it is side-lined, as only compliance is rewarded.

By contrast, trickster figures in narratives are not invested in improving their "facework" or performing a social ritual; they does not aspire to being nice to others or being likeable; they reject the concepts of "earning a title" or "exercising a function"; they do not intend to become a civilized person or a good citizen. The willingness to build a persona emerges out of the propensity for imitation, out of the desire to belong to a social group. Jung writes:

> *Human beings have one faculty which, though it is of the greatest utility for collective purposes, is most pernicious for individuation, and that is the faculty of imitation. Collective psychology cannot dispense with imitation, for without it all mass organizations, the State and the social order, are impossible. Society is organised, indeed, less by law than by the propensity to imitation, implying equally suggestibility, suggestion, and mental contagion. [...] We could almost say that as a punishment for this uniformity of their minds with those of their neighbours, already real enough, is intensified into an unconscious, compulsive bondage to the environment. [...] To find out what is truly individual in ourselves, profound reflection is needed; and suddenly we realise how uncommonly difficult the discovery of individuality is. (CW7: para. 242; emphasis is mine)*

To imitate is to belong, to compromise, to be like others in your environment. Yet, the trickster dislikes everything to do with compromise, and goes with complete difference, with strangeness, with otherness – with pure individuality which, from the point of view of society, looks stupid and selfish. The genre staples of trickster behaviour – boundary-breaking, shamelessness, refusal (or lack of care) to have an assigned name, shapeshifting, messy, explosive creativity, obsession with taboo subjects such as sex and excretion – act as repellents against the persona, against the requirements to 'behave', to be proper, to become embarrassed when a protocol is breached, or to be ashamed when accidents happen. The persona is all about controlling oneself and one's environment, by feigning similarity, by fitting in, by seeking external personal validation and professional confirmation.

As Marshall et al. put it, as human beings, we are constantly engaged in production of this public self as we negotiate ourselves through life (Marshall et al. 2020, p. 1). Even though the persona has "the appearances of being an individual", it is, in fact, "the way an individual can organize themselves publicly" (2020, p. 3). Persona is thus a 'performance of individuality' and not in any way the authentic individual self.

Both the persona and the rebellious human agency behind it are the two sides of what Jung calls the individuation process – the journey of becoming oneself while navigating various societal expectations and rules. Individuation is complex, and can be painful, not least because it involves two parallel strands: separating individual consciousness from the collective unconscious (Jung CW10, para. 290), and maintaining the boundary with the external reality. It

is this boundary that the trickster inhabits, keeping alive the conflict between the personal and the social.

THE TRICKSTER: DEFINITIONS

Essentially, the trickster serves as a metaphor for the human ability to manage and process change as well as to adapt to the environment. Many mythological canons have a trickster character: a fool, a clown, a rebel, a prankster or simply a force of nature who does unpredictable things and behaves in ways that are socially unacceptable. (In traditional narratives this is a male figure, although he does occasionally switch between the sexes.) In other words, the trickster brings chaos into an existing order of things with the aim (if tricksters can have an aim at all) of testing the limits of existing rules and canons. By testing the structure, the trickster challenges outdated guidelines and triggers reform and renewal. Rebellion has consequences, though: mythological tricksters are traditionally punished by gods or other representatives of power for disturbing what is otherwise a well-organised, tightly-controlled and well-preserved order. An intriguing and complex figure, the trickster has attracted the attention of sociologists, depth psychology theorists, anthropologists, and folklorists who have offered various definitions of it.

Carl Jung describes the trickster as an archetype – a primordial figure shared by the whole of mankind and residing in the collective unconscious. Jung emphasises the dual, contradictory nature of the trickster: a shape-shifter, malicious prankster, and demonic being who also displays features of a saviour (Jung CW 9/I, para. 436). According to Paul Radin, the trickster is "creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously" (Radin 1972, p. xxiii).

Sometimes, Karl Kerenyi notes, by defying gods, the trickster becomes a culture hero – for instance, like Prometheus who enrages Zeus by bringing fire to the people (Radin 1972, p.181). Similarly, Laura Makarius emphasises the trickster's role as a "civilizing hero" as well as his propensity to violate taboos, and break laws and limits (Hynes & Doty 1993, p. 85). Mac Linscott Ricketts also emphasises the link between the trickster and social progress, stating that he is the "symbol of the self-transcending mind of humankind", "the human quest for knowledge and the power that knowledge brings" (Hynes & Doty 1993, p. 87). Of course, perspective is everything. One person's culture hero is another person's fool – depending on whether one is inclined to comply with the rules and to work with the authorities or, by contrast, to defy the system by pointing out its flaws. In fact, the trickster's shamelessness and fearlessness, which society can regard as foolish qualities, are inseparable from its role as s culture hero, as someone capable of advancing systems and improving the existing order of things by challenging stale notions, rules and laws. The trickster and the system are inseparable, they need each other, and their relationship is dynamic; it is dialectical.

In the narrative structure, the trickster represents an unpredictable element that is introduced into an existing order of things, then challenges or demolishes it, and the new order is introduced at the end of the narrative – often after the trickster's disappearance. The spirit of the trickster may reside in one or more characters, in an accompanying animal, or emerge as an accident or a chance. It can also inhabit multiple characters – or "possess" them – causing them to behave unpredictably and to say stupid things. For instance, in *Fleabag,* the titular protagonist may be said to be hosting the trickster spirit as she keeps breaking the rules and crossing the boundaries of propriety. Others around her also seem to think that chaos erupts whenever she is present (her brother-in-law Martin (Brett Gelman) and her father (Bill Paterson)), although it is clear from the comedic situations that the actual chaos, and the

accompanying impulse to control it, actually resides within the characters themselves as they are individuating in the unpredictable urban metropolis.

The trickster (as a spirit) also changes the status of the characters in the narrative (particularly the protagonist), thus assisting them in the process of becoming themselves, of coming to terms with various social and physical limitations to their agency. In this sense, the structure is reminiscent of the tripartite ritual consisting of separation, transition, and incorporation. In a feature-length film, the trickster is often introduced a few minutes after the beginning of the film, after the main order is established and the principal relationships between the characters are outlined. In a television series, the trickster's activities can be spread over several seasons, often contributing to the maturation and individuation of the protagonist who is learning to handle their agency against the backdrop of societal expectations. A trickster narrative is a story of loss of control, of temporarily existing in a liminal space: in its course, the characters (including the protagonist) and their environment undergo a transformation brought about by chance, chaos or other unpredictable forces.

COMMON MOTIFS IN TRICKSTER NARRATIVES[1]

Trickster narratives tend to be structured in a particular way, and contain a number of stock features, including entrapment or imprisonment, shapeshifting, boundary-breaking, having no name or several names, boundless creativity, loss of control, dissolution at the end of the narrative, the presence of animals, scatological jokes and promiscuousness. Not all elements have to be present in a narrative, and they do not have to follow in any particular order although it is fairly common for an entrapment scene to open a trickster narrative (the trickster is stuck/locked in a bottle or a box), and for the dissolution motif to round it up (the trickster disappears) (Bassil-Morozow 2015, pp. 12-31).

The motif of entrapment and limitation in narratives explores the existing order's fear of the trickster's power and tests the system's flexibility. For instance, in one of the stories in the Prose Edda, Loki the trickster is famously captured by the Aesir, tied to a stone and locked in a cave to prevent him from unleashing Ragnarok – a chain of apocalyptic events which would end the gods' rule (Byok 2005, pp. 70–72). Cinematic tricksters end up being trapped in a variety of containers, from wooden and glass boxes (Rik Mayall's character in *Drop Dead Fred,* 1991; Loki (Tom Hiddleston) in *The Avengers* (2012)) to a mechanical rhino (*Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1995)). Entrapment does not have to be physical; it can be mental, in which case it is often displayed by a protagonist prior to her or his turning into a trickster or plunging into chaos (*The Mask* (1994), *Hector and the Search for Happiness* (2014)). The trickster feels trapped because their personality is larger than life (or 'overinflated', from the system's point of view): the assassin Villanelle (Jodie Comer) in *Killing Eve* is unhappy in 'normal' society, but even the company of murderers and outlaws is too constraining for her. She ends up rebelling against her employers, an international mafia organization called The Twelve.

The entrapment motif can also be regarded as the human agency's bid for freedom, for the right to individuate. Together with her co-tricksters, Luci the demon (representing the animal connection) and Elfo the elf, Princess Teabeanie from *Disenchantment* experiences all kind of entrapment, from a planned marriage to a neighbouring prince, to rooms, cages, boxes, carriages, and vaults. King Zog, Odval, Sorcerio, the top priestess, and Big Jo want Bean to "resume the life of obedience, chastity and sobriety"– to restore her (female) persona (Series 1,

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[1]Trickster attributes were initially outlined in *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* (Bassil-Morozow, 2013) and *The Trickster and the System: Identity and Agency in Contemporary Society* (Bassil-Morozow, 2015).

Episode 3). At some point she describes her future as a mother and wife to prince Merkimer as "entering a state of semi-permanent pregnancy". The externalised trickster (Luci) pretty much escapes by the end of the first episode; while its carrier – the princess – leaves the kingdom of Dreamland in the last episode of the season. The trickster's duty is to unsettle that which is stagnating, and Luci does the job well. Moreover, the motif of entrapment is applicable to other female characters suffocating underneath their persona – primarily Queen Dagmar who, for the duration of the entire first season, exists as a statue.

Similar to the motif of entrapment, other trickster features are linked to the system's desire to control individuals, and to manage change. Tricksters like to cross all kinds boundaries, from physical to the rules of acceptable behaviour (Ace Ventura does this all the time, particularly when he finds himself at parties surrounded by wealthy people). They refuse to have one name assigned to them (Villanelle's other name Oksana, and she regularly adopts pseudonyms). They cannot be shamed into compliance, into being 'normal', and are full of creativity so disorderly and explosive that society seeks to control it (like Mozart in Forman's *Amadeus*). Meanwhile, Teabeanie keeps fighting for the woman's right to be disorderly, to be drunk, to look stupid, to publicly embarrass herself, to learn by trial and error instead of following the protocol. She rejects the idea of shame in general, and its gendered version in particular.

Likewise, sex, excretion and reproduction are very common themes in trickster narratives because all three are taboo subjects which are required to remain hidden behind the socially acceptable persona (Sacha Baron-Cohen's character, Borat Sagdiyev, has used scatological jokes to shock middle-class Americans). The trickster seeks to uncover taboo themes for the purpose of shocking the system, of unsettling some of its rigidities. As such, silly as it looks, the trickster genre is ultimately about the freedom of expression, the freedom from oppression, and the balance between the individual life and societal demands. In the words of Baron-Cohen,

> *The truth is, I've been passionate about challenging bigotry and intolerance throughout my life. As a teenager in the UK, I marched against the fascist National Front and to abolish Apartheid. As an undergraduate, I traveled around America and wrote my thesis about the civil rights movement, with the help of the archives of the ADL. And as a comedian, I've tried to use my characters to get people to let down their guard and reveal what they actually believe, including their own prejudice.*

(Baron-Cohen, 2019)

As a creature outside the norm, the trickster exists in the periphery, on the edge, on the limen. Liminality is defined by Victor Turner as a phenomenon that is "outside or on the peripheries of everyday life" (Turner 1975, p. 47). During the liminal phase, "the ritual subjects pass through … an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few … of the attributes of either the preceding or the subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states" (Turner 1979, p. 16). Transposed onto the ritual process, trickster narratives almost entirely consist of the liminal phase, of disorderly metamorphosis, a tumultuous learning process, which, at the next stage (after the departure of the trickster) is incorporated into everyday existence.

Such a story has two contradictory didactic aims, simultaneously emphasising the importance of order in one's life (it is chaos when the regime is gone), and the necessity of revising this order from time to time, of keeping a critical eye on it (in case it stagnates and keeps one from progressing). Bound with these two aims is individual development, the

individuation process, the perpetual negotiation between human agency and the necessity to belong, between the self and other(s).

THE FEMALE PERSONA

The female trickster is notably absent from folklore and mythology in most cultural canons, as well as from popular entertainment. The consensus seems to have been that principal features of trickster narratives (such as toilet humour, openly displayed sexuality or disorderly behaviour) are far too rough for a female protagonist to display. All of the traditional and most of the cinematic trickster characters are male; presumably because taboo-breaking, and chaotic and shameless behaviour are seen as being contrary to the patriarchal vision of the well-behaved woman. As Ricki Tannen writes in *The Female Trickster: the Mask that Reveals* (2007), the emerging trickster-woman has to create "a new relationship with the historical adversity and hostility found in Western consciousness toward females manifesting autonomy, agency, and authenticity as single, fulfilled, physically strong, and psychologically whole individuals" (Tannen 2007, p. 10).

Expectations of propriety are different for women and men, and the female persona has its own dimensions defined by norms and taboos, and reflected in traditional narratives. It has connotations of modesty, kindness, dependency, silence and fragility. The female persona, the mask of femininity, is an inactive woman who voluntarily renounces her agency in order to be accepted by society. To transpose Goffman's analytical framework onto gendered interaction, women are participants in the interaction ritual who "accept definitional claims made by others present" (Goffman 1990, p. 21-2). Human beings would normally aim to keep definitional disruptions to a minimum, and take precautions to avoid them. Women are socialised into gender descriptions, into what women look like and how they should behave, and perform according to conventions.

Appearance is a big part of this performance, the costume and make-up seen as an inherent part of being a woman. Simone de Beauvoir notes that "costumes and styles are often devoted to cutting off the feminine body from any activity [...] She paints her mouth and her cheeks to give them the solid fixity of a mask; her glance she imprisons deep in kohl and mascara [...]" (De Beauvoir 1997, p. 190). Often metonymically conflated with nature via her connection with "natural rhythms", the woman has to enhance her body and face because "in woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint, by human will remoulded nearer to a man's desire" (1997, p. 191).

The female persona is certainly a large part of the myth of 'feminine mystery'. Women are 'written out' of trickster narratives because their prescribed performative functions did not include unruly elements; or these elements have been labelled excessive – as signs of mania, hysteria, or madness. The trickster is grotesque, but the female grotesque evokes the wrong kinds of excess: uncanny rather than carnivalesque, to use Mary Russo's terminology, and the uncanny woman is not entertaining but scary (Russo 1997). The trickster also inhabits the limen, the boundary, and pushing the boundaries of the existing social order by introducing change – in other words, being proactive – is traditionally seen as being in breach of the female persona.

Bodily fluids, the focus of so many a joke in trickster narratives, stop being funny and become abject when applied to female characters (Brian De Palma's rendition of Stephen King's *Carrie* (1976) is a good example of the fear associated with the female body). A menstruating woman is a subject to taboo and stigma in many societies, while in the West the subject menstruation has traditionally been surrounded by mystery and "dignified silence". Coded as

abject, relegated to the cultural limen, some natural functions of the female body, to use Kristeva's expression, challenge the master from their place of banishment (Kristeva 1982, p. 2).

The individuation process ("the journey") had also been traditionally applied to male rather than female characters before things gradually started to change in the past twenty years. Psychotherapist Maureen Murdoch asked Campbell in 1981 whether the stages of the heroine's journey were different from those of the men's journey. Campbell replied that the woman, in fact, does not have to make a journey at all because she has already achieved perfection, she is already accomplished:

> *In the whole mythological tradition the woman is there. All she has to do is to realise that she's the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realises what her wonderful character is, she's not going to get messed up with the notion of being pseudo-male. (Murdock 2013: 7)*

What Campbell implies here is that the woman not need to individuate; she also does not need an agency, an independent identity and a motivation to go on a journey. Campbell's woman does not need to 'begin' anything because she embodies the passive treasure the male character is seeking. She also does not need a trickster which would propel her on this journey.

As bearers of cultural shame, women have been associated with perfection and cleanliness, while at the same time being seen as bearers of 'sin', responsible for the fall of Adam and the loss of Paradise, and privy to terrifying mysteries of the female body such as periods and childbirth. A 'respectable woman' wears the female persona, the mask that betrays none of the bodily struggles and physiological processes a woman experiences every day. The female trickster is the spirit of disorder that breaks through the female persona – through cultural expectations – to defy shame and, ultimately, to offer socio-political change.

FLEABAG

On the surface of it, Fleabag (played by the author, Phoebe Waller-Bridge) is a dedicated bearer of the female persona: she wears makeup (bright-red lipstick and perfect eyebrows), her clothes are stylish, and she is slim. She is happy to please men by wearing Agent Provocateur lingerie (Season 1, Episode 1) or a sexy jumpsuit (Season 2, Episode 1). Yet, this mask repeatedly reveals gaps; it fails to attach to her face securely – Fleabag's rebellious nature slips off quite often, and she ends up with her make-up smudged in the middle of the street or her nose bloody in a public toilet.

Fleabag is a dysfunctional adult with a messy life. She has a hospitality business (initially failing but doing well in Season 2) and very few friends. Her family is equally dysfunctional although they like to pretend otherwise. We know from the flashbacks that she may have caused her best friend's suicide by going out with her boyfriend. Fleabag is obsessed with sex, has a string of bizarre relationships and one-offs, has very little idea of what she wants to do with her life and does not seem to be planning a family. In other words, she is not 'normal' – or, at least, not from the society's point of view.

In the true trickster fashion, the protagonist does not have a name, only the titular nickname which marks her out as 'trashy' and outside the norm. Having a nickname instead of a name marks the trickster's departure from the norm; it demonstrates its inability to belong to society (and the state) that aims to record individuals' credentials and to neatly profile them.

Fleabag's habit of breaking the rules is also reflected in the series' semiotic choices such as the use of asides. Occasionally she speaks directly to the camera, crossing the fourth wall and

revealing the personality behind the persona. For instance, during the anal sex scene in the first episode of Series 1, she communicates her feelings and sensations directly to the audience while her partner ('the Arsehole Guy') is unaware of this internal-external dialogue. Her love interest in Season 2, however (the Hot Priest (Andrew Scott)), notices these transcendental moments and starts asking her where she keeps disappearing (although, as a boundary-breaker himself, he does occasionally look into the camera as if he knows what lies behind the looking glass). Throughout the two seasons, Fleabag keeps revealing the true emotions and impulses – her own and others' – hiding underneath the veneer of propriety.

In trickster narratives, boundary-breaking practices range from physical boundaries to social, psychological, and symbolic ones. Crossing (any kind of) border between the visible and the invisible is an activity which results in a re-drawing of maps, in transition, in movement – as well as in a magical ability to see beyond the surface, to predict future change. The Greek Hermes and the Roman Mercurus are both psychopomps, and in many other trickster narratives the ability to move freely between life and death is regarded as a sign of immortality.

The breaking of the fourth wall device allows Fleabag to see what others cannot; to transcend everyday routine, even at the expense of her own happiness. What Fleabag really breaks by refusing to play along societal rules is the boundary between the ego and the persona, between private thoughts and an external presentation. This kind of transcendent activity acknowledges, and dismisses, the artificiality of persona with its desire for compliance.

Possessed by the trickster spirit, Fleabag is also obsessed with sex which she sees everywhere. Even a therapist's scarf reminds her of it ("I am very horny, and your little scarf is not helping" she says in the second episode of Season 2). In the first episode of Season 1 Fleabag confesses to her audience (while sitting the toilet – traditionally a taboo setting for female characters) that she loves sex because it makes her feel needed and desired. She is omnivorous and insatiable: she masturbates a lot (at one point, to an Obama speech with her boyfriend Harry (Hugh Skinner) next to her in bed, picks up a random guy on public transport, and propositions Belinda (Kristin Scott Thomas) whom she meets at a business awards ceremony. Fleabag turns everyday situations into something to do with sex, often bordering on harassment, from a bank loan interview to a breast examination. Usually the prerogative of the male version of the trickster, sex obsession flies in the face of decorum and modesty – the shame-forming requirements for being a decent member of a civilised society.

Performed by a woman, sex obsession or toilet humour (which is present in abundance in *Fleabag*, including a scene in Season 2 when she farts in a lift, disgusting and embarrassing her sister), make the transgression look more formidable because culturally defined behavioural limitations – the gendered persona – are tighter for females. When a woman pushes the boundary, she moves to the limen where she is judged and stigmatised. Fleabag, however, is prepared to deal with the consequences.

Mythological and folkloric tricksters are often thieves and liars (both Hermes and Prometheus steal from the gods), these two properties emphasising their determination to break the social contract, to express their agency and to stick the middle finger to authority. Fleabag, too, betrays the (middle class, female) persona by committing a range of misdemeanours (and not being ashamed of it): in the first two episodes of Season 1 she steals a bottle of wine from a corner shop, a twenty-pound note from the wallet of her date, and takes an expensive artefact, belonging to Godmother, from her father's house. She takes her top off in front of the banker (Hugh Dennis) interviewing her for a loan. In Season 2, she hits Martin for being rude about Claire's miscarriage (even though Martin does not know that Claire has just

had it). Even as a minor offender, Fleabag does not fit neatly into the box of societal expectations: a middle class woman, she enjoys recreational theft.

Her moments of stealing can also be seen as flashes of inspiration, as impulses which she cannot control. A trickster's creativity is messy and unpredictable, born out of a wild desire to live, and to bring things to life. It is impulsive, often misplaced or even completely inappropriate, like Fleabag's *Psycho* joke when she accosts Harry in the shower with a large kitchen knife. Harry panics badly and starts crying. A trickster's creativity is also linked to its shapeshifting qualities such as changing genders, and turning into other people and animals. By dressing as a (male) horror film character, Fleabag demonstrates exactly this kind of fluidity; even though her thoughtless shapeshifting is not appreciated by poor Harry.

The animal motif finds its expression in the elusive fox which the Hot Priest keeps seeing in the presence of Fleabag. Animals are frequent guests in trickster tales, and constitute one of the many guises a trickster can take, from coyote and raven (Northern American tricksters) to monkeys (Hanuman, Sun Wukong) to spiders (Kwaku Anansi), hares and tortoises. Jim Carry's trickster-possessed characters are often accompanied by animals and pets (Ace Ventura, Stanley Ipkiss in *The Mask*). For Jung, this association is designated to show the transitional nature of the trickster; the fluidity of its consciousness as it learns to become human but is not there yet (CW 9/I, para. 473).

In Russian fairy tales, the fox (Kuma Lisa) is a trickster character; the "wily one", who lies and cheats, often to trap and eat other animals, or to con them out of their possessions. Fleabag's fox who keeps scaring the Hot Priest (who believes the animal stalks him), is a projection of his mixed feelings about Fleabag: he is both fascinated by her and afraid of his own emotions, of the power and destructive potential of sexual attraction. The fox appears at the moment when Fleabag and the Priest are discussing the subject of celibacy (Season 2, Episode 4) and the Priest looks spooked. The haunting effect of the failure to be in control of one's emotions becomes apparent every time the Priest unexpectedly bumps into Fleabag: "I thought you were a fox" he says he says to her before the wedding ceremony. Unsurprisingly, the final scene of Season 2 ends with the fox turning up at the bus stop after the Priest and Fleabag have just parted, and Fleabag, knowing that the priest will be terrified, sends the animal after her lover: "He went that way". In a similar fashion, Fleabag's father is using the imaginary mouse, supposedly stuck in a mouse trap in the attic, to express doubts about his forthcoming wedding. The animal trickster stands for rule transgressions, for agency, for the escaped (if selfish) individuality in the face of societal structures (including religion and marriage).

The entrapment motif is largely exemplified in the series by Fleabag's sister, Claire (Sean Clifford). Claire epitomises the constraining set of behaviours which a middle-class woman must display: decent, proper, demure, always observing the protocol in social situations, and never discussing uncomfortable or taboo subjects. If having to stave off what Goffman calls "situational improprieties" is bad enough if you are middle class, the task becomes monumental if you are a female (Goffman 1966, p. 5).

Throughout the two seasons, up to the very last episode, Claire is the true bearer (and wearer) of the female persona: she has a well-paid office job, wears appropriate clothes for her gender and class (silk blouses, nice trousers), does not talk about her problems ("everything is totally fine" is the standard answer), does not say any "bad" words (like "penis") or discuss controversial or difficult subjects, particularly if they relate to the female sexuality or anatomy (defecation, masturbation, miscarriage). Claire likes to ward off embarrassing moments by reminding herself that she has "two degrees, a husband and a Burberry coat". She is wary of physical touch or expressing emotions in any other way.

She also keeps reminding herself, her sister, and her family that her relationship with her husband Martin (Brett Gelman) is fine when this is far from the truth. In other words, she is trying to live up to the ideal of the middle-class female persona: outwardly nice, presentable, polite, wealthy, and successful; the kind of person who does not say what she really thinks; who announces to the waitress that the sauce is delicious when she really thinks it is disgusting. She wants to appear 'normal' in terms of what society requires from individuals, and particularly in terms of what her social circles expect from her. This kind of persona aspires to the "economy of presentation" which allows the participant in a social situation to "by-pass unresolved issues" and to instead "proceed to the ones that might be resolved" (Goffman 1966, p. 4). With this constraining mask on, she is struggling to individuate.

One of the key lessons of trickster narratives is that perfection is impossible, however hard one tries to bypass all the uneven bits and uncomfortable elements. The permanently embarrassed, passive-aggressive sister serves as a foil to the trickster role of Fleabag in that their difficult relationship shows the emotional strain a persona has on the individual required to wear it. Claire likes to be in complete control over her body and work schedule. However, her desire for perfection and her definitional claims are regularly wrecked by Fleabag's trickster spirit, particularly in formal situations guarded by strict behavioural protocols such as funerals, weddings and dinners.

The need to "fit in", Goffman notes, means that "the individual must be 'good' and not cause a scene or a disturbance; he must not attract undue attention to himself, either by thrusting himself on the assembled company or by attempting to withdraw too much from their presence" (Goffman 1966, p. 11). In other words, "to fit in" means to navigate the trickster position of being "betwixt and between"; it means trying not to be "too much" or "too little". One needs to be right in the middle, which may lead to failure.

Ignoring the reality of her own emotions makes Claire unhappy, yet she projects her inner turmoil onto Fleabag and blames her for the chaos erupting wherever she goes. 'Loss of control' is one of the staple themes of trickster narratives in that the trickster is not fully in charge of its body and mind, and causes everyone in its vicinity to also lose control over their minds and bodies. Fear of losing authority, of not managing the situation, is intimately connected with the feelings of shame, embarrassment and inadequacy. When tricksters play their tricks on humans, they show the power of chance over rational frameworks and established orders.

Claire is horrified when the trickster spirit takes over her seemingly perfect middle class life. In the opening scene of Season 2, Fleabag 'hijacks' Claire's miscarriage, causing a stir and attracting attention – not least because she ends up hitting Martin who then hits her back. At the Women's Awards Ceremony organised by Claire's firm, Fleabag breaks the glass trophy and then replaces it with the stolen naked woman figurine. When announcing the winner, Claire, against her will, repeats the sexual harassment joke Fleabag had just told her. When awkwardly flirting with her lover and co-worker Klare, she keeps inadvertently hinting at sex. The 'fitting in' process, which is supposed to result in outward perfection, is continuously disrupted by the trickster external/internal spirit.

Even though Fleabag is blamed for the ruined social occasions and everyone's moments of lost control, the actual location of shame and embarrassment is internal, hidden behind the persona, smoothed over by polite demeanour. The sisters' father is about to marry a narcissist who keeps interrupting him and inventing new ways of attracting attention to herself. Claire is married to a selfish, needy man who had tried to kiss her sister, and then denied it. She is also cheating on him with a colleague in Finland. The priest is fighting his demons. The people at the

table cannot face these issues so the pressure escapes, suddenly, in a very embarrassing situation. Fleabag's erratic behaviour is a litmus test for hidden vulnerabilities, wounds, emotions and desires. All she does is expose the tension between ego-consciousness and persona; the tension that her relatives and friends, as social individuals, are either unaware or keen to avoid because facing the demons would involve the pain of self-realisation, and not everyone is ready for it. By contrast, wearing the mask is an easier solution both for the individual and society as it supposedly protects the surface of social interaction. Except, in *Fleabag* it does not, exposing the ultimate failure of persona to prevent social tensions.

Ultimately, the trickster impulse in the series is linked to the subject of the individuation process, with the difficulty of choices, with being human. Having to make decisions, being an adult can be a daunting process. It can be an unsettling, imperfect, messy, trial-and-error process that belongs to the realm of the trickster. Fleabag says in her confession to the Hot Priest that she wants to belong to a structure which would tell her what to do, how to live her life. The trickster often merges with the protagonist as an unrealized (and unconscious) portion of the protagonist's personality, prompting in her the desire for change, the impulse to escape the entrapment. As both the Priest and the Counsellor (Fiona Shaw) point out, Fleabag knows exactly what to do – to keep learning and to keep acting; to appreciate her agency and to celebrate all the errors that she and her friends and family make in course of the complex and painful process of becoming oneself.

CONCLUSION

This paper has brought together the concepts of trickster and persona to illustrate the continuous dynamic between individual agency and the rigidity of social rules; as well as between change and progress on the one hand, and the established social order on the other. Both in cinema and television the trickster as an element of the narrative refers the element of chaos in an otherwise organized system. It has a range of standard attributes such as the impulse to express one's personality in a uniquely creative way, the rejection of embarrassment, shame, conformity, and refusal to belong to a structure.

Meanwhile, the concept of persona has been examined using a combination of Erving Goffman's presentation of self theory and Jung's persona concept. It has been argued that the female persona – the artificial vision of socially acceptable femininity – is a particularly rigid psycho-social structure, comprising repressive and unrealistic expectations for women's looks, bodies and conduct in public situations. Using the nameless protagonist of *Fleabag* as a case study, it has showed how the female trickster can challenge these prescribed attributes and expectations while defying the individual-controlling techniques: shame, social embarrassment, social rejection and ostracism.

Unlike her sister who is desperately trying to conform to social norms, Fleabag is not afraid to demonstrate her "deviance" – she is sexually voracious (and omnivorous), clumsy and erratic, and emotionally unstable. She is a kleptomaniac, a liar, and a cheater. She makes insensitive and improper remarks, farts in lifts, ruins special occasions with her behaviour, and seduces a priest. Yet, Fleabag the trickster is also the testing ground for the relationship between the persona and the ego, between the mask and authentic self. A story of an erratically individuating woman, the show reclaims the right of female characters (and women in the audience) to individuate in a messy, tragicomic way, by celebrating blunders, imperfection, and feeling lost.

Fleabag's talent for awakening the individuation process at the expense of the performing self also extends to other characters. Her consistent erosion of the persona throughout the show's

two seasons results in a series of comically catastrophic events leading to the change (of status) for both the protagonist and those involved with her. Like any trickster, she reveals the precarious balance between external demands and individual needs in the individuation process: the people she embarrasses on a regular basis (friends, relatives, lovers and random acquaintances) often end up questioning their own life journeys. After all, the trickster's ability to dissolve self-control over minds, bodies, and destinies is not just a source of comic effect in narratives. It provides a narrative impetus for characters to get on the road for self-discovery.

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