FLEABAG AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY: BREAKING-THE-FOURTH-WALL OF A WOMAN'S INNER WORLD

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ABSTRACT
This essay analyzes and describes the use of self-reflexivity in the series *Fleabag* (Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2016-2019), showing that the televised series makes use of breaking-the-fourth-wall to create an ongoing relationship between the main character and the viewer. By testing the series' application of self-reflexivity against Jean-Marc Limoges' five criteria of fictional engagement, the essay explains why breaking-the-fourth-wall in *Fleabag* is not a mere comical device but an entire diegetic layer that shapes the viewer's perception of the character and their engagement with the story. Finally, this study offers a description of the concept of a *personal live audience* as a way to explain the dramatic importance of breaking-the-fourth-wall in the series, namely, how it impacts Waller-Bridge's performance as an actress, and it empowers her character. The overarching goal of the essay is to demonstrate the originality self-reflexivity in Fleabag and how breaking-the-fourth-wall helps to perceive the inner world of a character with a dimensionality that would be difficult to achieve without the use of self-reflexivity.
Keywords: Breaking-the-fourth-wall; Self-Reflexivity; Fleabag; Personal Live Audience;

FLEABAG E AUTO-REFLEXIVIDADE: QUEBRANDO A QUARTA PAREDE NO MUNDO INTERIOR DE UMA MULHER

RESUMO
Este estudo analisa e descreve o uso de auto-reflexividade na série *Fleabag* (Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2016-2019), mostrando o uso que a série faz da quebra da quarta parede de forma a criar um relacionamento contínuo estabelecido entre a personagem principal e o espectador. Ao testar o uso de auto-reflexividade da série em relação aos cinco critérios de engajamento ficcional de Jean-Marc Limoges, o estudo explica por que razão a quebra da quarta parede em *Fleabag* não é um mero dispositivo cômico, mas uma inteira camada diegética que molda a forma como o espectador percepciona a personagem principal da série, bem como o envolvimento do espectador com o mundo ficcional em Fleabag. Finalmente, este estudo oferece uma descrição do conceito de *personal life audience* enquanto forma de explicar a importância dramatúrgica de quebra da quarta parede na série, nomeadamente, como o dispositivo afeta e molda o desempenho de Waller-Bridge enquanto atriz e como fortalece a sua personagem. O objetivo principal do estudo é demonstrar a originalidade da extensão em que a auto-

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reflexividade ocorre em Fleabag e como quebrar a quarta parede ajuda a perceber o mundo interior de um personagem com uma dimensionalidade que seria difícil de alcançar sem o uso de auto-reflexividade.

Palavras-chave: Quebra da quarta parede; Auto-Reflexividade; *Fleabag*; Personal Live Audience.

FLEABAG AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Fleabag is a two-season television series written and starred by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, produced by BBC Three, and co-produced by Amazon Studios. The series was adapted from an anonymous theatrical play and was run from 2016 to 2019 on Amazon Prime. It focuses on the main character, Fleabag, as she deals with grief and the complexities and dilemmas of modern, urban life existence. *Fleabag* makes abundant use of a device commonly known as breaking-the-fourth-wall, where Fleabag's character looks and often speaks into the camera as if addressing the viewer. The play initially made use of the breaking-the-fourth-wall device, and the series uses it so extensively that it evolves into a layer in the story and creates a sense of an ongoing relationship between Fleabag and the viewer. Furthermore, it gives us privileged access to Fleabag's thoughts, emotions, ethical dilemmas, insecurities, expectations, and all the inner experience of her character. Addressing the viewer can develop into a storyline of its own, an ongoing relationship and interaction that moves the story forward and helps to shape the way viewers perceive Fleabag's character.

Classical theater, literature, modern art, and film and television have all made use of the breaking-the-fourth-wall device. Although it is not an original device in and of itself, it becomes relevant due to the extent of its use in the series. Self-reflexivity occurs when a fictional story takes advantage of narration devices that expose its fictional boundaries, such as speaking directly into the camera and addressing the viewer. In *Fleabag*, breaking-the-fourth-wall gives both the main character and the viewer an awareness about the fictional construction of the story.

Breaking-the-fourth-wall is increasingly common across television series today, although Fleabag takes it to an extreme. Jean-Marc Limoges' essay "The Gradable Effects of Self-Reflexivity on Aesthetic Illusion in Cinema" is useful to understand the

effects and presence of self-reflexivity in contemporary television Limoges characterizes self-reflexivity around five conditions.

Self-reflexivity, according to Limoges, occurs when a stylistic or narrative device reveals the enunciation mechanisms of that medium, or "[…] reminds the audience that they are watching a film" (2009, p. 391). Even though addressing the viewer is a form of self-reflexivity, the device does not necessarily imply the ejection from the story-world. Neither does self-reflexivity involve the breaking of a fictional contract between viewer and story. According to Limoges, self-reflexivity ejects the viewer from a story world in different degrees only upon the establishment of five conditions. Those five conditions are as follows:

1) Perceptibility: the viewer must be aware of or perceive the actual breaking-the-fourth-wall;

2) Context of reception: in a setting like today's, where the device is used frequently on film and television, self-reflexivity might not eject viewers from the fiction as forcefully as something taking place a few decades ago;

3) Genre: self-reflexivity may breach the aesthetic illusion more or less depending on the genre (horror is less prone to it), where *auteur* cinema is more prone to it;

4) Modalities of occurrence: does breaking-the-fourth-wall happen at the beginning, middle, or end of a film or episode? If it occurs at the beginning of an episode, it establishes a contract with the viewer where they are expecting it to be something frequent. If it happens at the beginning of an episode, it will not necessarily eject the viewer from the story-world but will become a part of it; however, if it happens at the end an episode, it might cause a deconstruction of the status of verisimilitude of the story, where a viewer might feel that what they just watched was unreliably presented as fictional truth;

5) Motivation: if the device is gratuitous, if it a mere stylistic artifice, or even an occasional gag, it may eject the viewer from the serendipity of the story. On the other hand, if it is diegetic, symbolic, or dramatically motivated, then it will be naturalized and will have a weaker power to eject the viewer. (2009, p. 397-401).

HOW DOES *FLEABAG* MEASURE AGAINST LIMOGES' FIVE CRITERIA?

Looking and speaking into the camera, or breaking-the-fourth-wall has traditionally been a form of self-reflexivity that ejects the viewer from the aesthetic illusion of fiction. However, not all types of breaking-the-fourth-wall are, as Limoges points out, anti-illusionist, in the sense that they imply suspension of disbelief. If self-reflexivity is diegetically motivated, then it can be integrated into the aesthetic and fictional contract of viewers as they watch a fictional story develop. Furthermore, self-reflexivity, for its abundance, becomes not only an awareness of the viewer that they are watching a fictional piece of work but also becomes a form of self-reflexivity for Fleabag's character herself. In other words, she seems to be aware that she is guiding the viewer along and, therefore, she is reflecting on herself and the events and characters in the story. Self-reflexivity becomes an integral part of the fictional universe of the story in *Fleabag*. Fleabag's first address to the viewer (only a few seconds into episode 1) does not go unnoticed. Fleabag's character talks explicitly into the camera in a set with no other characters and creates a sense of self-reflexivity that is maintained throughout all the episodes in the two seasons. That relationship is established between Fleabag and the viewer as a form of mutual self-reflexivity and will be maintained, constructed, and evolve with its dramatic arch too.

Breaking-the-fourth-wall is often clearly noticeable to the viewer since Fleabag frequently shifts her gaze away from the other characters and looks into the camera. However, it is often also used subtly, as when Fleabag gently glances at the camera, and may in those circumstances go unnoticed. In many instances, the camera is positioned among characters in an immersive way, and Fleabag may look into the camera. However, it may be perceived as if she is looking at another character. Triangular conversations or dinner table events may be examples of that. In that sense, viewers may fail to notice the breaking-of-the-fourth wall, and Limoges' first criterion of *perceptibility* is not fulfilled at all times, meaning that self-reflexivity does not, in this case, imply an ejection from the story. While viewers are aware that Fleabag is addressing them, there is a fictional contract established where viewers expect that to happen.

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As far as the second criterion, it is useful to look outside the series for the *context of reception*. In *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media* (2011), Werner Wolf explains that metareferences (meaning, to other media) or self-reflexivity (meaning, within a specific work) have always existed but have become increasingly common in today's film and television. In Wolf's words:

> The evolution towards ever more metaization in our signifying systems and the arts and media in particular may be said to naturally produce a growing familiarity with metareference. This familiarity through habituation (as well as other factors) in conjunction with an increasing number of people who are "media-savvy" (Caldwell 2008: 357), which also includes a heightened awareness of mediality as such, has arguably increased what may be referred to as 'meta-tolerance'. It is easy to see that such a heightened tolerance towards metaization reduces the formerly disconcerting or startling effect of some if not all metareferential devices. It may even increasingly permit authors and recipients bent on immersion within the representational media, to maintain aesthetic illusion to a formerly unthinkable extent in coexistence with metareference […] As a consequence, a frequent effect of metaization, namely defamiliarization, diminishes as an obstacle to wide-spread reception, which in turn facilitates the continuation of, and even a gradual increase in, metaization, since this has come to be experienced as something 'normal'. Thus, owing to this feedback loop between heightened meta-tolerance permitting ever more 'harmless' uses of metareference, the effects of the metareferential turn will arguably contribute to its perpetuation in the long run. (2011, p. 28)

Wolf makes a case that metareferences, in general, which also include the case of self-reflexivity, are a "natural," evolutionary way for media to represent characters and construct storytelling. This idea seems agreeable if we think that other innovations in film and television history, such as changes in editing, style, and mode of narrative, were integrated over time and became part of viewers' expectations. When film became an edited medium, it may have caused viewers to surprise, but it gradually became perceived as something natural. Similarly, when television first broadcasted live from multiple locations, it was also met with awe, but that has become merely part of something viewers take for granted today. Likewise, in the case of metareferences, and the specific example of self-reflexivity, Wolf's assumption makes evolutionary sense since metareferences are so commonly found in film and television today. A quick survey of televised series will demonstrate the use of self-reflexivity, from *House of Cards* (2013-2018, Beau Willimon) to *The Office* (2005-2013, Greg Daniels, Ricky

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Gervais, Stephen Merchant), from *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014, Craig Thomas and Carter Bays) to *Miranda* (2009-2015, Miranda Hart), the 2000s are saturated with examples of breaking-the-fourth-wall. This meta-layer of a direct address of the viewer has become part of the fictional contract that today's viewers are used to establishing with a series. It can be inferred then that the abundant use of self-reflexivity in television today implies that breaking-the-fourth-wall has produced familiarity and does not result in ejecting the viewer from the story.

In terms of the third criterion, Limoges refers to *genre conventions* and expectations as a critical point to determine whether or not self-reflexivity can result in ejection from the story world, or, in alternative, the maintenance of the aesthetic illusion of fiction. Generally speaking, there seems to be less propensity in, for instance, the horror genre for breaking-the-fourth-wall without ejecting the viewer from the aesthetic illusion of fiction. *Fleabag* is a noir comedy or dark comedy. Contrary to the horror genre, a drama, comedy, even a thriller or suspenseful genres lend themselves more to breaking-the-fourth-wall without ejecting the viewer from the story.

In today's film and television landscape, editing is no longer transparent necessarily, as it used to be for decades. However, viewers have become accustomed to an editing style that claims its presence. In *Sherlock* (2010-ongoing, Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat, Stephen Thompson), for instance, viewers become familiar with seeing the text on the screen, and with that text being a diegetic and dramatic component of the story unfolding on each episode. Self-reflexivity in a noir comedy like Fleabag might simply mean an added layer of meaning, an extra meta-character, and an invisible presence in the story-world, without causing any kind of rupture with the fictional continuity. From an experiential level, breaking-the-fourth-wall in Fleabag unfolds with seeming continuity. Even the way editing intercuts Fleabag's reactions, comments, and expressions for the camera all come with the action flow of the sequences in a way that does not create rupture or pause. Many of Fleabag's reaction shots for the viewer could well be reaction shots visible for the other characters. However, they become distinct only for the fact that she looks straight into the camera, or the camera does a rack focus that makes the background blurry and isolates her face in the mise-en-scène. The style of the film contributes to a sense of experiential continuity through camera work and

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editing. By integrating Fleabag's address of the viewer continuously, self-reflexivity becomes one more layer together with what could be considered other layers in the series, such as the characters, emotions, events, and contributes to the creation of meaning. Criterion three then does not result in ejecting the viewer from the story.

As far as *modalities of occurrence* – Limoges' fourth criterion –, Fleabag's first address of the viewer does not go unnoticed since she addresses the viewer in a set with no other characters and directly speaks into the camera, creating a sense of self-reflexivity. Fleabag, however, continuously breaks the fourth wall in that same scene. In the following scenes, the device is maintained and creates a form of interaction throughout the story. In my analysis of *Fleabag*, I found an average of 39 instances in each of the 12 episodes throughout the two seasons. The fourth-wall applied in such a consistent manner that it becomes evident that it is a device consciously used by Phoebe Waller-Bridge in the writing of the series. Being such a regular device, it creates a sense of familiarity for the viewer. For instance, in scenes where Fleabag interacts with antagonistic characters, there will often be more reaction shots and comments addressing the viewer as if she was making sure that the viewer understands her point-of-view about what the other characters are saying or implying. This effect is particularly noticeable in her interactions with her step-mother, where Fleabag consistently breaks the fourth-wall at a high rate, versus her interactions with her father, with minimal instances of breaking-the-fourth-wall. She guides the viewer and seems to want to be in control of how the viewer is assessing the story. In the cases where Fleabag interacts with characters that she has particular empathy for, or characters that may be vulnerable, like her father, then Fleabag restrains herself from addressing the viewer as if showing respect for her father and the privacy and vulnerability of their interactions. The emotional connection between Fleabag and the viewer establishes the logic of breaking-the-fourth-wall in each scene. The patterns of breaking-the-fourth-wall offer a reliable flow of communication for viewers who may, even if in intuitive ways, perceive and relate with Fleabag's desire to include the viewers more or less in each scene. Due to the consistency of the device, we could argue that Limoges' fourth criterion does not result in ejection from the story.

The fifth and final criterion to test the power of ejection caused by self-reflexivity, as proposed by Limoges, is *motivation*. What is the motivation for breaking-the-fourth-wall in Fleabag? If breaking-the-fourth-wall becomes a mere gag, with no diegetic or dramatic power, then it can eject the viewer from the story. However, if the motivation for breaking-the-fourth-wall is diegetically, symbolically, or dramatically motivated, it is also a natural, even though extra, meta-layer of the story and will not necessarily cause ejection from the story. An analysis of all the shots and instances when the fourth-wall gets broken reveals more about the device. The diegetic, dramatic, and symbolic relevance of the device has become quite apparent from that analysis. Diegetically, Fleabag uses the self-reflexivity to comment in-depth the background of the story. In many instances, Fleabag serves almost as an on-camera narrator putting the viewer up to speed about the story. Another diegetic use of the device is Fleabag's anticipation of what some characters are going to say. Frequently, she anticipates what some characters (especially her sister) are going to say, serving almost like an omniscient narrator. Other times, Fleabag will ask a rhetorical question out loud while looking into the camera, as if addressing the viewer, shaping the viewer's reading of a story event. Finally, Fleabag will often comment on what other characters say as if filling the viewer in about background information and story context. Fleabag's asides and commentary contribute to the diegetic progression of the series throughout the two seasons.

In terms of dramatic motivation, breaking-the-fourth-wall is key to shaping Waller-Bridge's performance, as well as the emotions associated with her character. In terms of her performance, breaking-the-fourth-wall seems like a place of safety, comfort, trust, and power. Fleabag is the only character who breaks the fourth wall and engages in self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity becomes her safety net, the place of comfort where she goes to when she feels vulnerable. It is also the place of trust since she develops a relationship with the viewer that she cherishes and maintains with devotion throughout the two seasons. She cares about the viewer and about what the viewer thinks of her. The relationship with the viewer and the trust involved in that relationship is essential for Fleabag. That certainly has a dramatic motivation in the sense that it shapes Waller-Bridge's as a performer.

Finally, the device has a dramatic motivation related to the power that it represents for Fleabag. Fleabag has an advantage point by recurring to self-reflexivity, and she uses it to display her manipulation skills and her sarcasm and dark humor. The device has an outstanding and phenomenological power over her performance and the emotional arc of Fleabag's character. Even though Fleabag is not an entirely reliable narrator, since she is quite deceitful about her guilt in the death of her friend Boo, her relationship with the viewer is key to having a full, in-depth perception of who she is. All the facets of her character and her inner thoughts and emotions would be challenging to reveal within a fictional contract with an intact fourth-wall. Therefore, the device is crucial to a more dimensional perception of who Fleabag is, which serves as a form of dramatic motivation.

There also seems to be a symbolic motivation behind the use of self-reflexivity and breaking-the-fourth-wall, especially when the character of the Priest (Andrew Scott) is suddenly able to hear Fleabag's breaking-the-fourth-wall. The Priest is in the epicenter of Season 2 and certainly comes into the series with the symbolic power of religion and spirituality. Breaking-the-fourth-wall is a place of truth for Fleabag; it is where the viewer gets to see who she is, something inaccessible to the other characters. The fact that the Priest is the only character who can hear Fleabag addressing the viewer can is an extraordinary power and can be interpreted as a symbolic power of his spirituality. Another example connected with symbolic motivation is related to the loss of her best friend Boo and the grief and guilt she struggles with for most of Season 1. Fleabag often breaks the fourth-wall in Season 1 to express emotions related to her grief and guilt. In that sense, grief and guilt confront Fleabag and the viewer with a deeper meaning of life that is lost in a busy, urban everyday lifestyle. There is, then, evidence that self-reflexivity and breaking-the-fourth-wall construct diegetic, dramatic, and symbolic motivation in *Fleabag*.

Limoges' fifth criterion seems to characterize *Fleabag*'s use of these devices as forms of self-reflexivity that do not result in ejection from the story. Fleabag stands against Limoges' five criteria in a way that demonstrates that self-reflexivity is not used as a mere gag-device but has more profound implications as to how we understand its use in contemporary television. The concept of *personal live audience* that I present

below is a further extension of the idea that, even though breaking-the-fourth-wall is not original, its extent and complexity have a role in the shaping of the viewer's experience of *Fleabag*. In that sense, it is a groundbreaking use of the concept in a televised series.

PERSONAL LIVE AUDIENCE

We can better understand *Fleabag*'s use of breaking-the-fourth-wall by looking at the adaptation of the story from theater. The series resulted from the adaptation of what was originally a homonymous, solo, theater play also written and starred by Waller-Bridge. Waller-Bridge initially performed the play at the 2013 Edinburgh Festival Fringe (GARNDER, 2013). The initial idea of the character of Fleabag came from a challenge by a friend, where Waller-Bridge created a sketch for a 10-minute section in a stand-up storytelling night.

However, Fleabag manages to take advantage of the power of film and television's space and time kaleidoscopes, yet utilizing a theatrical device that adds something new to the end-result. In other words, Waller-Bridge managed to make use of an old and outdated dramaturgic device in the theater (breaking-the-fourth-wall) and give it cinematic, diegetic, and dramatic appeal for the screen. Waller-Bridge's original play consisted of her sitting in front of the audience, exposed, vulnerable, and alone. Whereas multi-character, theater plays have traditionally sought to take advantage of the concept of a fourth-wall, for a solo actress, the audience is all she has, and that may have been an almost natural way to deliver her performance. Instead of hiding herself from the audience, and encapsulating herself inside the four walls of fiction, Waller-Bridge may have found in the audience the "character" that she needed. In her adaptation for the screen, Waller-Bridge brought with her the idea of a personal live audience. That personal live audience may well be a result of her experiences in the theater, rather than an abstract, imaginary audience. Perhaps, that is also why her relationship with the viewer feels so real and well integrated into the series.

Waller-Bridge treats the viewer like her "personal live audience," not just in the sense of using asides to explain her story but also as an ongoing relationship developed throughout the two seasons. A writer can imagine a personal audience for their story. However, with *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge creates and addresses her personal audience as a simulation of the actual, live in the theater. We could consider the play as the experimental laboratory for Waller-Bridge's writing of the series for television. The interpersonal level of communication experienced by Waller-Bridge during the live performance of her play certainly created a sense of shared meaning and responses that impacted Fleabag's "personal live audience." By "personal live

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audience," and not just a "personal audience," I refer to Waller-Bridge's design of an imaginary viewer that takes advantage of two critical values for her story.

On the one hand, a "personal live audience" might make storytelling more intelligible for a writer and performer, since a story and narration becomes almost like a guided tour to that "personal live audience" and becomes more conversational that the same story told without a viewer in mind. Without a "personal live audience," storytelling might be perceived as formulaic. The use of a "personal live audience" allows Waller-Bridge to write and perform with her theatrical experience and a viewer in mind, as in a conversation when we reveal information in a situational context, rather than a decontextualized storytelling with no awareness of the audience. The play could have well functioned as preparation and practice and even given Waller-Bridge some ideas about the storytelling mode, and the pace. On the other hand, creating a "personal live audience" can function as a "helper" for Waller-Bridge's acting and a boost of her character's self-confidence. In almost diametral opposition to Konstantin Stanislavski's methods and reflections (HINCKLEY, 2008), Waller-Bridge acting seems to take advantage of that ongoing, established relationship she develops with the viewer.

Stanislavski developed the concept of "communing with the viewer" (HINCKLEY, 2008). He applied an acting practice where the interaction with the viewer was done indirectly through the other actors. That was the way he found to solve the issues created by stage anxiety and public solitude. In other words, she is taking advantage of the fourth-wall to create a safety bubble between actors and audience. Waller-Bridge does precisely the opposite with her writing and performance in *Fleabag*, by breaking-the-fourth-wall and keeping an ongoing interaction with her "personal live audience." She transferred the dramatic device to the television series, adding an extra to the television adaptation but also taking advantage of the cinematic style of the series to create unique aesthetics and a unique experience of the story. The placement of the camera replaces the viewer from her theater play. It brings with it all the familiarity and trust built during her live performances, thus giving her performance a sense of confidence and empowerment that is in the opposite extreme to Stanislavski's practice. For the continuity and consistency of her breaking-the-fourth-wall, the device gains dramatic, narrative, and stylistic importance, making it original by being explored to an unseen level of sophistication. Self-reflexivity in *Fleabag* could be seen as an alternative to Stanislavski's paradigm and could potentially shape future series to develop the device even further. The question today is not whether viewers will find self-reflexivity strange, but whether or not they will see the absence of self-reflexivity as something missing in their experience of a series.

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Apart from describing the importance of Fleabag's self-reflexivity and breaking-the-fourth-wall, it matters to characterize the device. In the case of *Fleabag*, self-reflexivity is a form of detachment between Fleabag and the other characters. It is almost like the other characters were just objects or pretexts for Fleabag to keep a conversation going with the viewer. Alternatively, perhaps a way for Fleabag to maintain a cathartic inner dialogue as she processes and copes with her painful memories and identity. The viewer is like a best friend, someone who understands her thought processes, her jokes, her emotions, her frustrations, in a way that no other character does.

Furthermore, because the viewer is present in the story world but is invisible for the other characters (mostly, except for the Priest), Fleabag can anchor herself to a commodity that is not available for the other characters. She can vent, joke, or get things off of her chest, and she has an advantage compared to the other characters. However, the viewer, as her "personal live audience," is not just an element of empowerment but an ongoing relationship that is developed and subject to its dramatic arc. The relationship with the viewer starts in a tone of trust and complicity but culminates in distrust and doubt at the end of season one, as we learn that she is indirectly responsible for the death of her best friend, Boo. Her friend takes her own life after finding out her boyfriend slept with Fleabag. It takes much of season 2 to rebuild that trust with the viewer and reshape it to a new arc when Fleabag might be perceived in a more realistic and vulnerable way than she was in season 1. Fleabag's relationship with the viewer is strongly affected when we discover that Fleabag is partly and indirectly responsible for Boo's. At that point, the series also changes from a comical and perverse to a dramatic and vulnerable mood. This change in tone is only possible due to the ongoing relationship between Fleabag and the viewer. Self-reflexivity's impact on the mood of the series gives it a dramatic role, rather than a merely comical effect.

BREAKING-THE-FOURTH-WALL OF A WOMAN'S INNER WORLD

Introducing the layer of an ongoing relationship between Fleabag and the viewer has a phenomenological impact on the series. The device not only provides narrative information, such as background information and commentary, which makes the storytelling much more efficient but also shapes the experiential engagement of the spectator. The first consequence of breaking-the-fourth-wall, and *Fleabag*'s stylistic use of the device, relates to the dissolving of the boundaries of intimacy and privacy between character and viewer. The viewer is immersed and in close physical proximity

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to Fleabag's character. This idea of immersion is notably exemplified in the first sex scene in episode 1. In that scene, Fleabag is talking to the viewer on a close-up shot while engaging in sex. By acting out the scene with physical proximity, Fleabag achieves a dissolution of the boundaries related to intimacy and privacy. The camera placement and the dramatic interaction between Waller-Bridge and the camera break the boundaries of privacy. When breaking-the-fourth-wall occurs, the camera films in a tighter framing, and often moves closer to her just before a moment of self-reflexivity. The sarcasm and darkness of the genre come, in part, from the phenomenological appeal of Fleabag's facial expressions and the close focal distance and actual physical proximity of the camera to her. Even though darkness has a symbolic sense related to the tone of the series, it is also, in part, an authentic assessment of *Fleabag*. When compared to the series *Miranda* (which shares topics, themes, and concepts with Fleabag), Fleabag is filmed in a more cinematic way, with less light and more contrast, in opposition to the brighter and more evenly lit Miranda. *Fleabag*'s cinematic style, insofar as camera placement and lighting, results in a more definite phenomenological appeal. Fleabag's body, facial expressions, clothes, and all the materiality of the mise-en-scène impact on the meanings and emotions in the series (cinematographer – Tony Miller; director – Harry Bradbeer).

Even though the other characters cannot hear or see Fleabag's interactions with the viewer, she usually interacts with the viewer intimately, whispering words, or subtly looking into the camera. She does not seem to whisper or be subtle due to any concerns related to the other characters but simply to create a sense of intimacy, privacy, and exclusivity with the viewer that relates to a phenomenological appeal of her character. This idea suggests that the meanings and emotions perceived by viewers are not a mere result of verbal information or actions but the sense of physical proximity, the sensory modalities of smell, touch temperate, and pain, and other layers of sensory experience. Fleabag shapes the ongoing relationship with the viewer through physical proximity with the camera, the modulation of her voice, but also through the presentation of her body in an intimate way, her sexual desire, and the texture of her skin.

The second effect, or result, of *Fleabag*'s breaking-the-fourth-wall, is the materialization of Fleabag's inner thoughts, desires, emotions, and feelings through

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verbalized content and her facial expressions. Waller-Bridge's decision to write the series in a way that continuously breaks the fourth-wall results in a living portrait of Fleabag's inner anxieties and her self-reflection on her own identity. Even though Fleabag's experience in the series is individual, private and unique, and does not necessarily represent all the spectrum of experiences that someone can have in a contemporary urban world, it certainly sheds some light on the part of what that experience. Even though Fleabag's inner experience is not fully comprehensive of a woman's inner experience in a contemporary urban world, it is still significant and representative. In that sense, *Fleabag*'s breaking-the-fourth-wall has a phenomenal appeal related to understanding someone's experience in today's world at a level that goes beyond what can be represented in a narrative with, exclusively, externalized information.

To an extent, this resonates with the idea of masks that we find in literature, where self-reflexivity is often practiced. In Clarice Lispector's work, for instance, most notably in *The Hour of the Star* (1977), we have the idea of wearing masks as a way to present ourselves in social situations. Masks have been used abundantly in the theater too and have a strong relationship with modernism in that they indicate profound duality in a character's personality – a tension between internal and external existence, between a private and a social self (SHEPPARD, 2001). With Fleabag, breaking-the-fourth-wall reveals Fleabag's real face, the removal of the mask, the exposed truth. Other series make use of breaking-the-fourth-wall and, yet, the social masks are not necessarily revealed, and the inner thoughts and emotions of a character are not necessarily exposed in front of the other characters. With Dexter (2006-2013, James Manos Jr.), for instance, we know the truth because of Dexter's commentary/narration and because of his actions in different social contexts. When *Dexter* is interacting with other characters, the fourth-wall is not broken as it is in *Fleabag*, viewers only hear Dexter's thoughts through his commentary/narration. Something similar happens with *House of Cards* (2013-2018, Beau Willimon), although in this case, the fourth-wall is broken visually but mainly when other characters are not present in a scene. With *Fleabag*, a paradox occurs when the removal of the social mask in front of the other characters happens at a dimension

that goes unnoticed by the other characters and allows Fleabag to feel safe and in control.

Self-reflexivity and breaking-the-fourth-wall can be a natural response in contemporary media to the complexity of individual experiences and identities outside the grand narrative that marked much of television production in the United States and the United Kingdom until the 1990s (NÖTH and BISHARA). In a sense, it can be considered that cable, streaming, and the internet came to fragment the media landscape and multiply the overall demand for content. Simultaneously, contemporary societies have also evolved towards more complex and nuanced values and beliefs that have placed more freedom on individuals but also more figuring out of those complexities and how it shapes our identities. Fleabag's extensive use of self-reflexivity and breaking-the-fourth-wall seems then a useful way to deal with the complexities of contemporary life. For viewers, it becomes an integral layer of their experience of the series and way to create cinematic immersion and dramatic interest, which has become increasingly common in the New Golden, or Platinum, Age of Television (BIANCULLI).

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