Where did you go?! Trans-diegetic address and formal innovation in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television series *Fleabag*

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Keywords: direct address, theatrical aside, trans-diegetic address, diegetic/non-diegetic, theatrical migration, *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, progressive television form, cringe-dramedy, trans-diegetic imagery

Abstract:

The article examines formal innovation, authorship and representation within Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television series *Fleabag* (2016-2019). Through close examination of the developed use of direct address within the programme, in particular two key moments of trans-diegetic address, the analysis considers how, contrary to ontological assumptions, the adaptation of the theatrical 'aside', when converted for screen, can function to support, strengthen, layer and enhance aspects of a narrative, as well as help build performer/audience connectivity through perceptions of intimacy, authenticity and female agency.

Introduction

This article examines formal innovation within Phoebe Waller-Bridge's critically acclaimed television series *Fleabag* (2016-2019). Emerging amid a wave of popular female writers in the second decade of the twenty-first century both here and in the USA, the work of these writers is often characterised as material about, by and for women. Often featuring authors as centralised roles within their own writing, shows such as *Chewing Gum,* or *I May Destroy You* (Michaela Coel, 2015–2017, C4 / 2020, BBC/HBO), *Girls* (Lena Dunham, 2012–2017, HBO), and *Catastrophe* (Sharon Horgan, 2015–2019, C4), can be seen as extending female agency through a direct application within the productions, functioning, as Faye Woods suggests, as evidence of a programme's 'authenticity' (2015: 8). Increasingly situated as part of a 'golden age of television for women', which 'understands and promotes the increasing representation of women on and behind the screen as a positive development for feminism' (Perkins, 2019), the ability of some of these shows to transgress genre boundaries also positions them critically in terms of formal innovation, in what has been described as 'the boundary-pushing feminist potential of female-authored comedy' (Woods, 2015: 2).

I initiate the discussion around consideration of the migration of the theatrical convention of the 'aside' from stage to screen, reflecting on the broader ontologies of both mediums in relation to the treatment and effect of 'breaking the fourth wall'. Key to the discussion is a consideration of this convention within what Dorothee Birke and

Robyn Warhol (2017) describe as the 'dramatic mode': an approach to fictional story-telling involving direct address where the spectator remains 'un-fictionalised'. This lack of audience framing preserves the diegetic/non-diegetic boundary, potentially contributing to what Tom Brown describes as 'ontological strangeness' when 'fictional characters seem to look out of their world and into ours' (2012: xiii). And yet the particular treatment of this convention within *Fleabag* is, I argue, a defining feature of its value, a result of its ability to fuse form and content. For instance, the interpersonal, domestic, and emotional themes/narratives the programme shares with other 'female-centric' forms written within this milieu, are, potentially, enhanced through the use of the 'aside' in terms of how an audience experiences the material. This is one example of the ways in which 'domestic and ordinary spaces associated with women are employed in compelling ways' (Perkins and Schreiber, 2019: 923). My argument, therefore, revolves, in the main, around such 'compelling devices' employed by Waller-Bridge and their relationship to narrative/form, authorship and representation.

Through close examination of the developed use of direct address within *Fleabag*, I hope to build on existing discourse in this area, particularly that of Faye Woods (2019) as well as Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma (2020), whose contributions to the topic offer nuanced analyses of the use of comedy within the work. Often featuring complex female protagonists where intimate depictions of comic abjection function as modes of emotional 'authenticity' and comic freedom, I consider the ways in which 'cringe-dramedy' (Havas and Sulimma, 2020) and 'precarious girl comedy' (Wanzo, 2016) operate within the programme, in terms of their relationship to the convention of the aside. The discussion then focuses on the use of the device in relation to narrative and audience, examining the multi-layered resonances produced in relation to its ironic, metaphorical, narrative and trans-diegetic function. However, it is the latter notion which informs, shapes and distinguishes the argument here. Whilst trans-diegesis is commonly found in relation to sound on screen, far less common is experimentation with trans-diegetic imagery, of the kind we find in *Fleabag.* To contextualise the argument, the material makes connections between *Fleabag* and existing discourse on the genre of the film musical. The discussion ends with an analysis of two case studies from the programme where trans-diegetic imagery occurs, pushing the boundaries of the form into aesthetic areas rarely seen on television.

It is probably worth disclosing that I initially approached this article from the position of theatre maker and scholar, not as a television academic. The study was first motivated from an interest in forms that borrow from other mediums and the ways in which cross-pollination might affect spectator experience. The successful translation of *Fleabag* from stage to screen is, I argue, testament to the strength of Waller-Bridge's creation and her acute understanding of the mediums in which she was

working. However, it is also worth noting that in my frequent references to 'audience experience', I base the term on my own personal response to the show and not as the result of any reception-based study. I acknowledge the generalised assumptions that might be inferred here and am aware of homogenising diversity of response. I speak, in a manner following Woods, as an example of the show's target demographic and 'use "us" and "we," on occasion, as an attempt to communicate the tight grasp that these programmes' aesthetic and storytelling choices encourage' (Woods, 2019:195).

Are you talkin' to me?!: Theatrical migration from stage to screen

The original production of *Fleabag* started its life as a theatre piece. Waller-Bridge describes how the development of the show began as 'a challenge from a friend to do a 10-minute slot in her stand-up storytelling night' (in Borge, 2020). As a classically trained actor who had previously performed small roles in other people's work, including *Bad Education* (Jack Whitehall, 2012–2014, BBC) and *Broad Church* (Chris Chibnall and Louise Fox, 2013–2017, ITV), Waller-Bridge had little experience in either standup or writing her own material. She describes how she had 'written a few short plays but hadn't written anything near a standup, solo thing' (Waller-Bridge in Borge, 2020) and how the idea of it was 'to be somewhere between the two' (Waller-Bridge in Borge, 2020). Directed by Vicky Jones (*Run,* 2020, HBO, *Guilt and Shame,* 2016 –[podcast]), the piece was then developed and performed as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2013 before being adapted for television in 2016. It was originally commissioned for BBC 3, which, at the time, was an online channel that until 2016 had been part of the BBC's broadcast network. BBC 3's service remit to provide 'innovative programming' to 16–34 year olds, leveraging technology as well as new talent (BBC Trust, 2013), seemed a suitable platform for a show written by a relatively unknown writer and performer. This online space, with its reduced pressure concerning audience figures, potentially nurtured Waller-Bridge's 'singularity of vision' (Perkins and Schreiber, 2019), allowing her to exercise more control than would perhaps be the case on more traditional broadcast platforms.

The Edinburgh theatre production featured Waller-Bridge in the titular role: a solo, one woman show, involving the delivery of a 65 minute monologue addressed directly to the audience. Despite the absence of other performers, the original material could be seen as one long 'aside': a chatty, often witty, exchange between Waller-Bridge and her audience. In her discussion of the aside within restoration theatre, Dawn Lewcock suggests that:

> In an aside a character may speak to the audience as the character relating the thoughts and reactions of that character; or may speak as choric commentator on human nature, its frailties and strengths; or as the actor himself [sic]; or

> change from one to the other in a single speech. Those asides, the glances at the audience, the catching of an eye, the nudge, nudge, wink, wink, would alter the whole perspective on a scene, both in terms of the visual perspective and the psychological perspective (2006).

In the original production Waller-Bridge intersperses re-enacted moments from Fleabag's life with ongoing commentary on the events, multi-roling the various characters involved, either physically or through voice-over. Characters ranged from her seemingly high achieving (but emotionally uptight) sister Claire, her father, various boyfriends and random strangers. So, whilst other material performers might be absent, different fictional characters are, nevertheless, presented throughout, enabling Fleabag to relate the thoughts and reactions of her character in relation to them without them noticing, altering the perspective on the scene as Lewcock describes. For Biet and Trau theatre is, in its essence, 'first and foremost a place where one sees and hears bodies during a set amount of time, a place where bodies […] make manifest to other bodies […] words, discursive and physical signs' (2019: 44). In this sense the theatrical exchange between Waller-Bridge and the audience makes sense: Fleabag talks to a physical group of people who share the same time and space as her and are invited into her fictional world. The audience is permitted to laugh/cry or move about (to an extent) all within the conscious awareness of the performer on stage, inevitably playing a part in how the material is delivered and subsequently experienced by an audience. Even when the production was transmitted live via the National Theatre in 2019, despite the spatial separation, the possibility of direct communication could still be discerned by virtue of it happening at the same time as the audience watching it (give or take the slight technical delay of the live feed).

The migration of the aside from stage to screen, when considered in terms of its theatrical particularities, is, then, a risky departure. For instance, the fundamental ingredient upon which the function of the aside relies, is not present within asides on screen: the *material* presence of the audience. Of course, as Birke and Warhol suggest, within the medium of television:

> TV has always been talking to 'you'. From the 1950s onward, commercial messages, news programs, variety shows and anthology dramas, among other genres have established structures of address that project an audience sometimes inside and sometimes beyond the studio. (2017: 143)

Less common is the occurrence of the convention within forms of fictional drama. In their article 'Multimodal You: Playing with Direct Address in Contemporary Narrative Television' (2017), Birke and Warhol outline three dominant trends of direct address within fictional television. The first trend, the 'narratorial' mode, revolves around shows bearing a close resemblance to that of the novel with 'narrator figures who relate their own experiences to a more or less specified fictive audience' (142). Examples here include the readers of Carrie Bradshaw's magazine column

within *Sex and the City* (Darren Star, 1998-2004, HBO) or the children of the narrator in *How I Met you Mother* (Craig Thomas, 2005-2013, CBS) (Birke and Warhol, 2017: 142). The second trend involves shows linked to documentary, such as reality TV or mockumentaries: fictional shows emulating a closer relation to 'real' life. The third, which is of particular interest here, is the 'dramatic' mode, described as breaking the fourth wall by 'having characters talk directly to a "you" that cannot easily be situated as a part of the storyworld' (Birke and Warhol, 2017: 142). This trend is presented as 'a form that imitates a convention of stage performance: the monologue addressed directly to a theatrical audience' (Birke and Warhol, 2017: 142). It is within such a mode that I locate the television adaptation of *Fleabag*, for reasons that will be discussed shortly. Before that, I would like to consider some of the broader, ontological differences between asides on stage and screen.

In *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema* (2012), Tom Brown suggests that whilst 'throughout history, the cinema has had no problem in producing films in which fictional characters address themselves to viewers who are inaccessible/invisible to them […] cinematic direct address can only ever feign the contact between actor and spectator common to theatre' (Brown, 2012: xi-xiii). The transfer of the aside to screen can produce an uncanny kind of experience in the viewer through (sub)conscious knowledge that the character is both real and not real, familiar and unfamiliar. They speak to us, but they are not really there, in a corporeal sense. This produces 'ontological strangeness' when 'fictional characters seem to look out of their world and into ours' (Brown, 2012: xiii). However, whilst, perhaps, uncanny, this affect does not necessarily diminish the efficacy of the device within screen performance. Indeed, Brown discusses how early examples of direct action to camera, such as the infamous gun shot down the lens of the camera in *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903), 'had early cinema spectators fleeing from the screen, as they (also perhaps apocryphally) did from the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of a train at Ciatot* (1896)' (2012: 2). Of course, audiences have far more cinematic literacy now, having been subject to its illusions for more than a century.

However, in the shift from theatre to screen, a potential change occurs in terms of how the aside is experienced by an audience. Instead of bringing the audience and character together in a spirit of shared and physical fraternity, the camera can present a more intimate and individual relationship between the character and spectator. Brown suggests that 'it is clear that having a character address the audience directly is a very particular gesture towards intimacy with that audience' (2012: 13) – a quality harder to cultivate in the sprawling expanse of an auditorium. The illusory feeling of 'closeness' often produced by the close up or medium shot, therefore, seems to compensate for the lack of material presence (of performers/other audience members – if viewed alone) afforded by the aside on screen. Birke and Warhol suggest that asides on screen within the dramatic mode can also function to enhance the personal

viewing environment of certain programmes: 'the actor's aside to "you" seems to pierce the boundary of the television screen and enter the viewer's domestic space, an effect that could not be achieved in a cinema or even a live theatre performance' (2017: 153).

It is, perhaps, for such a reason, that Waller-Bridge chose to keep but adapt the original audience address, which constituted the main body of her original theatre text, in the conversion to screen. In the opening to the published play-text, she describes how she is 'obsessed with audiences. How to win them, why some things alienate them, how to draw them in and surprise them, what divides them' (Waller-Bridge, 2017: v) and how 'adapting Fleabag for TV in 2016 meant […] experiments with the audience took another interesting turn' (Waller-Bridge, 2017: vi). In the original theatre production, the audience is privy to the varying exploits and sexual intimacies of a '21st century anti-heroine' (Gardner, 2013). The character shares with her audience anxieties about her credentials as a feminist, a confession concerning a desire to lose five years of her life in exchange for the perfect body, or her intensifying online pornography addiction. Such intimate revelations between Fleabag and audience seem nurtured by the illusory 'closeness' of the screen within the TV adaptation, potentially compensating for a lack of material presence between character and spectator. Waller-Bridge describes how 'in theatre, people come to you, or your characters [whereas] in TV characters arrive in people's living rooms, at their kitchen tables, and are even taken to bed with them!' and how it's 'a very intimate way of communicating with an audience' (Waller-Bridge, 2017: vi). This mirrors Horace Newcomb's seminal (1974) study examining the symbiotic relationship between the size and placement of the 'small' screen within the home, and the way in which we experience intimate content on television (245). Similarly, Woods describes 'an intimate gaze […] compounded by the access given to our protagonists' bedrooms and bathrooms' (2019: 196). There is, therefore, a marrying of form and content within the programme in terms of what is happening and how it is communicated to an audience. For example, when the viewing environment of the spectator matches the scene environment of the character/s, the overall viewing experience can be enhanced through a kind of shared encounter. The choice to maintain audience address in the television adaptation is, therefore, an informed and astute one, contributing to the successful translation of the 'aside' from stage to screen. The results potentially intensify the level of intimacy experienced by the spectator, fulfilling the writer's ambitions of how to 'win' audiences, draw them in and surprise them.

Shared intimacy is established from the beginning of the first season, when we join Fleabag in bed with a casual lover: she is revealing to 'us' by speaking directly to the camera whilst 'getting on with business', intimate thoughts on the job in hand (quite literally). Apart from her lover, no one else is present who is able to hear Fleabag's

commentary to camera during the scene. There is, therefore, no one else to whom her words are being addressed, so 'we' the audience, assume that she speaks directly to 'us', the spectator, as the character she is with seems to hear nothing. This 'us' to whom she speaks 'cannot easily be situated as a part of the storyworld' (Birke and Warhol, 2017: 142), establishing the convention within that of the dramatic mode: Fleabag's off-screen audience is not fictionalised but rather addressed in its actuality. This establishes a premise for the rest of the show, a relationship between protagonist and audience where, through intimate and attentive sharing of her thoughts and experiences, the spectator acquires a 'special' kind of status.

The notion that the 'audience' is somehow 'special' is reinforced at certain moments within the programme. For example, in the second season in episode two, when pushed by her therapist (Fiona Shaw) about having no friends (something Fleabag has previously confessed to), Fleabag reneges on the information a little defensively with: 'I have friends!' before turning her gaze to the camera and winking at it. Oblivious, the therapist then asks her if she sees them a lot and she replies: 'Oh… they're always there' before, again, turning her gaze to the camera. Due to having some understanding of Fleabag's loss of her best friend and there being little evidence that she has other friends, as an audience we assume that Fleabag is referring to her off-screen audience: that they are her friends who are 'always there'. As Nussbaum notes: 'Fleabag's asides […] turn viewers into "Fleabag's new best friend"' (Nussbaum, 2016).

There is, of course, ironic humour within this statement: the audience is indeed always 'there' in the sense that Fleabag, as a fictional construct, cannot exist without the viewer: her very presence is controlled by them turning the programme on or off. However, they are also not 'there' in the sense of sharing her fictional world: as viewers, our 'friendship' with Fleabag remains caught somewhere between fiction and reality. Brown describes how 'in theatre, direct address is a facet of the way that medium is dramatically "there in front of us in this moment"' [whereas] 'in cinema, where this present-ness is literally impossible, this illusory instantiation might also be used ironically' (2012: 16). This appears to be the case in *Fleabag* where a flavour of irony peppers Waller-Bridge's use of the aside throughout. Woods suggests that Fleabag's struggle to 'connect with or confess herself to family or partners […] puts her at a constant ironic remove from her life' (2019: 202). This is frequently seen in the quality of her looks, which are often ones of 'knowingness' – whether this be knowingness of a particular fictional situation, unspoken thoughts of a character or, as the previous example illustrates, knowingness of the 'trajectory of the [TV] narrative in which they participate' (Brown, 2012: 172). Birke and Warhol suggest that in 'an even more pronounced way than […] the narratorial mode and […] documentary mode, direct address in the dramatic mode both adds to and implicitly comments on the artificiality and anti-mimetic status of television programmes while insisting on

TV's salience to everyday 'real' domestic life' (2017: 153). It is for such reasons that direct address within the dramatic mode is perhaps less common than within that of the narratorial and mockumentary modes due to its overt rupturing of realist illusion through a pronounced reminder of the actuality of the audience.

Of course, in pronouncing the actuality of the audience, the use of direct address also functions to narrow the gap between the character of Fleabag and that of Waller-Bridge herself. The breeching of the audience's 'real world' space throughout the programme potentially enables the 'fictional' character of Fleabag to enter into the 'real' world of the spectator, a space that knows that Fleabag is actually Waller-Bridge. However, rather than simply exposing the artificiality of the televisual construct, the fact that it is the writer of the character who confronts the audience – as opposed to another actor playing the part – potentially intensifies the relationship between the audience and Waller-Bridge/Fleabag, particularly if a negligible distinction between performer and character is perceived. In an interview with *Indiewire* in 2017, Waller-Bridge described how the impulse to talk to the camera came from a motivation to confess the daily guilt she experienced in relation to her perceived self-image as 'a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist' (in Pollard, 2017). The disclosure to 'confess her sins' to the camera is revealing in terms of the degree to which the work is, in part, perceived to be autobiographical. Havas and Sulimma describe how, within cringe dramedy, a genre discussed shortly, there is a 'strategically thin line between the author-performer's "enacted" and "real" self [which] contributes in large part to the text's meaning-making' (2018: 79). Similarly, Woods talks about 'autobiographical blurring' in relation to Claire Wanzo's notion of 'precarious girl comedy'. This latter subgenre, which Woods aligns with *Fleabag*, shares many attributes with cringe dramedy, where intimate depictions of comic abjection function as modes of emotional 'authenticity' and comic freedom (Woods, 2019).

Perceptions of authenticity are exacerbated by the use of direct address through its confessional quality, penetration into 'real' life and closing of the gap between performer, character and audience. Waller-Bridge talks about autobiographical assumptions (in Thorpe, 2019), relating to the show which saw her family faced with unsolicited media attention during its initial broadcast, speculating on its connection to Waller-Bridge's lived experience. It is questionable as to whether such attention would have been produced had the writer not performed in her own material. For instance, similar use of the aside is employed in the historical television drama *Gentleman Jack*, written by Sally Wainwright, (2016 –) and staring Suranne Jones as the protagonist Anne Lister. However, knowledge of Jones as an actor who has performed in many different roles in the past and is not the author of the material, potentially influences an audience's inclination to see her as the character she is

playing. Despite writing and appearing in the TV miniseries *Crashing* in 2016, Waller-Bridge's screen presence was relatively unknown prior to the release of *Fleabag*. This, alongside the extended agency of the writer/performer/character, undoubtedly contributes to the potential authenticity, and hence perceived value of the work.

The aside and comedic form

Numerous films and television programmes have utilised the theatrical 'aside', with varying degrees of success. More commonly found in comedic work, following in the tradition of the 'cinema of attractions' and Vaudeville, such looks can be seen in films ranging from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986), to *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977) and the varying, exasperated looks to camera by Oliver Hardy in the films of Laurel and Hardy or indeed those of Charlie Chaplin. These examples focus around asides that involve a particular character speaking or looking directly to the camera within a scene, often as a kind of commentary on the unfolding action (and, usually, without an awareness by the other characters involved in the scene). This is in contrast to isolated moments of direct address, as you might find in films such as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing (*1989), for example, where the address might function to bookend or introduce particular scenes away from the action itself. In television, similar asides can be seen in programmes ranging from the *Bernie Mac Show,* (Larry Willmore, 2001-2006, Fox TV); *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (Andy and Susan Borowitz, 1990–96, Warner Bros); *Saturday Night Live* (Lorne Michaels, 1975–, Broadway Video); *The Young Ones* (Rik Mayall, Ben Elton, Lise Mayor, 1982–1984, BBC), *Mrs. Brown's Boys* (Brendan O'Caroll, 2011–,BBC), *Sean's Show* (Sean Hughes, 1992–94, C4), *Malcolm in the Middle* (Linwood Boomer, 2000–2006, Fox TV), *Chewing Gum* (Michaela Coel, 2015–2017, C4) and, perhaps *Fleabag's* closest relative, *Miranda* (Miranda Hart, 2009–2015, BBC).

This list illustrates the alliance of the convention with comedic form. Less common is its utilisation within dramas, as Woods suggests: 'direct address and breaking the fourth wall is normalised in factual television through its use of presenters. However, the form is rare in drama' (2019: 203). Exceptions to this include *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, 2013–2018, Netflix), *This is Going to Hurt* (Adam Kay, 2022, BBC) and the previously mentioned *Gentleman Jack* (Sally Wainwright, 2019–, BBC/HBO). The comedy within *Fleabag* is not immediately obvious, partly due to the lack of a laughter track/live audience but also as a result of its fusion of both comedy and drama. Havas and Sulimma situate the programme within a growing trend they describe as 'cringe dramedy', a genre predominantly cultivated during the 2010s as a 'mode of expression tasked with negotiating the tensions between drama and comedy, as well as intersectional relations of identity politics' (2020: 76). Female driven 'cringe-dramedy' is often perceived as challenging the predominance of male

orientated ‘prestige drama’ which occupied the preceding decade where shows such as *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gillian, 2008–2013, AMC), *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999–2007, HBO), *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002–2008, HBO) and *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007–2015, AMC) engendered an era characterised by high production values, ‘quality’ writing and ‘darkly realistic dramas premised upon male anti-heroes and the sexist and abusive treatment of women’ (Perkins, 2019: 920).

In contrast, aesthetics of ‘cringe dramedy’ usually focus on complex female protagonists at whom – as opposed to ‘with’ whom – an audience cringes at their violation of social and cultural taboos. Shows which feature writers in titular roles, such as *Chewing Gum*, or *I May Destroy You*, (Michaela Coel, 2015–2017, C4 / 2020, BBC/HBO), *Girls*, (Lena Dunham, 2012–2017, HBO), and *Catastrophe* (Sharon Horgan, 2015–2019, C4) function to subvert ‘gendered expectations about appropriate enactments of femininity’ (Havas and Sulimma, 2020: 83). Such violations are discussed in terms of ‘excess’ by Orlaith Darling who describes Fleabag as refusing to:

> sanitise her bodily processes, speaking openly about her menstrual cycle, addressing the audience from the toilet where she muses about sex, farting in lifts at business parties, and hooking up with men after sobbing in the toilet of their pub. (Darling, 2020: 141)

Complexity is evident within Fleabag’s character through the ongoing internal conflict she experiences relating to the death of her mother and best friend. Whilst largely deflected by Fleabag throughout both seasons – something discussed further below – Havas and Sulimma describe how ‘character “complexity,” […] modifies the “comedy” in cringe and becomes associated with the more prestigious dramatic mode, this way governing the texts’ appeal to cultural value’ (2020: 75). Intersectional identity politics are explored through the moral ambiguity or internal conflict of Fleabag’s character portrayed through the disparity between her class, age, gender and lifestyle choices. Ruptures to the conventional image of a certain-aged, certain-classed, privileged white female are frequently presented throughout. For instance, Woods describes how Fleabag’s emotional deflections through direct address are ‘a symptom of her current inability to make the emotional connections necessary for an embrace of adulthood’ (2019: 202).

Character complexity is further developed within the second season of *Fleabag*. Dominated by a growing attraction between Fleabag and a local priest (Andrew Scott), who happens to be conducting Fleabag’s father’s upcoming marriage ceremony, the attraction between the two characters acquires a level of psychological, emotional and metaphysical gravitas previously unseen in the preceding season. This attraction forces the priest to confront his faith and Fleabag a level of feeling prohibited since the death of her two closest companions: that of her mother and best

friend. Despite some resistance by the priest, a profound and almost tangible chemistry develops between the two. Whilst the level of cringe presented in the first season still persists, for example in the prohibited relationship between Fleabag and the priest, I would argue that the level of Fleabag's emotional investment seems to modify the comedy more within the second season. Her moments of deflection seem more charged; the gravitas of unrequited love colouring many of the asides made by Fleabag in relation to the priest and the tragedy of rejection intensified by the expansion of Fleabag's back story within this season. We see a much more vulnerable Fleabag here, a character who is trying to atone for the death of her best friend (for which she feels partly responsible due to sleeping with her best friend's partner) and confront the death of her mother – something intensified by the upcoming marriage of her father to her Godmother. The material appears, therefore, more complex and emotionally loaded. Previous actions are contextualized in terms of her internal conflict/grief, the aside enabling the audience to vicariously share her experience through an established intimacy. Despite a fleeting love affair between the two characters, the show ends with the priest (whose name, like Fleabag's, we never discover) choosing God over Fleabag, an ending not wholly unexpected, but nevertheless of some magnitude.

In the final scene of Episode 5 we see Fleabag 'shutting out' the audience by denying them access to a moment of physical intimacy between herself and the priest. In a bedroom scene we see the character physically close down her laptop screen which we learn has been filming her and the priest in bed up until this point. An audience POV shot captures her hand closing down the laptop, the image diminishing to black following the closure of the screen. This action is prefigured by a disapproving look by Fleabag into the lens of the laptop camera recording her. The manner in which this is executed suggests that Fleabag is, now, establishing boundaries with the audience: some things are in fact sacred, to be shared only between the two people involved. Of course, what is sacred for Fleabag is sacrilege for the priest, and it is this moment which ultimately leads to the demise of their 'communion' when the priest declares his love for God over Fleabag at the end of the show. However, it is in this sacred/sacrilegious moment of physical intimacy that the previously bestowed quality of 'specialness' is relegated to one where the viewer's own voyeurism is exposed and questioned. The (cheated) use of the laptop camera suggests that the moment should not be confused with past, less important intimate moments, to which we have been privy. The significance of the scene is also emphasised by the presence of the camera within the fictional world of the drama. No longer is it hidden, referred to only by the surreptitious glances of Fleabag. Rather it becomes a tangible object, something controllable by the physical touch of Fleabag herself. Again, there is an obscuring of the fiction/actuality binary here through revelation of the televisual construct, which functions to enhance and develop narrative meaning and connection. This is one of the ways in which the show employs a sophisticated use of trans-diegetic imagery, an idea which will be discussed shortly.

To conclude, a similar ‘shutting out’ of the audience occurs in the final scene of the second season. However, when Fleabag waves goodbye to the camera, there is hope: she is waving goodbye to ‘us’ in a manner of finality and, perhaps, thanks: she is not coming back but is strong enough to confront the trials and tribulations of her life without us. In this moment, the tragic and comic sit delicately side by side, the humour tempered in a final farewell filled with hope.

Crossing the line: Trans-diegetic address

The use of direct address to camera can function to expose the diegetic/non-diegetic binary of a show’s production. Diegetic sound can be understood as sound which exists within the fictional world of a show, such as dialogue, background noise or music which may be playing on a device within a scene. Perceived as being responsible for the evolution of the term since Plato, Etienne Souriau describes it as ‘all that is intelligible within the narrative, in the world implied or suggested in the fiction of a film’ (1953: 7). Conversely, non-diegetic sound (sometimes referred to as extra-diegetic sound) is sound which has been added in post-production to enhance certain moments, such as a music score or voice-over. With non-diegetic sound, the characters involved are, usually, unaware of such sounds: they exist outside of the periphery of their fictional world, often functioning to communicate the subtext/mood of a scene or the internal thoughts of a character. Frequently, in non-diegetic sound, the relationship of that sound to the narrative is described as ‘empathetic’ compared to the ‘anempathetic’ quality of diegetic sound. In the latter, sound usually functions in an objective manner, exhibiting ‘conspicuous indifference to the situation’ (Chion, 1994: 8).

Practices which problematise the diegetic/non-diegetic sound binary have a long tradition within cinematic and televisual history. Robynn Stilwell suggests that ‘many films begin with credit music that is full sounding and apparently non-diegetic but “shrinks” to the diegetic space of the first post-credit scene’ (2007: 197). Discourse around the binary is widely debated in relation to the genre of the film musical (see Altman, 1987, Heldt, 2013, Penner, 2017, Stilwell, 2007). The difficulty of maintaining this binary is pronounced within film musicals for obvious reasons: whilst each film may differ in terms of approach and effect, the general conventions of the genre dictate that songs function as a key component within the diegetic narrative of the fiction, despite often being accompanied by orchestration within the non-diegetic sphere. In this sense, unless all songs are rendered ‘realistically’ through, for example, characters playing on screen instruments, characters/viewers are faced with a conflation of the non-diegetic/diegetic space. Nina Penner suggests that: ‘Observing the different conventions governing film musicals in contrast to most other genres of film, some scholars have concluded that the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction is inapplicable to this genre’ (2017: 6) and how ‘in the context of non-

musical films, there is at least a consensus about how this distinction ought to be understood' (Penner, 2012: 15).

Subsequently, difficulties in distinguishing between the diegetic and non-diegetic occur in terms of the form a performance may take. In realistic dramas or dramedies, the conventions of the form usually require that the fictional world of the characters is hermetically sealed. The non-diegetic is, usually, clearly distinguished from this through sound-score or voice-over (if at all). However, the transgression of this binary is palpable in many fictional films and television programmes, as previously mentioned. Heldt (2013) outlines some of the more complex and nuanced ways in which sound is used in relation to screen performance. Contending that common perceptions of non-diegetic sound may in fact be more difficult to situate due to the temporal and spatial displacement of sound, he suggests that such displacement can occur when cutting between scenes that take place in different locations but at the same time. One example of this is where diegetic music in one scene functions as non-diegetic underscore in the other.

Susan Hayward describes the practice of slippage between the diegetic and non-diegetic as trans-diegetic, a property she describes in relation to sound as its 'propensities to cross the border of the diegetic to the non-diegetic […] remaining unspecific' (2007: 3). Similarly, Aaron Hunter talks about trans-diegetic music as a 'bridge between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic […] a bridge between such concepts as place and time in film (2012). Whilst there is, as Nina Penner suggests, 'a lack of terminological consensus' (2017: 7) when it comes to unifying the varying terminological nuances of the diegetic/non-diegetic sphere, the notion of unspecificity in relation to trans-diegesis is key to my purposes. Whilst obfuscation of the diegetic/non-diegetic boundary is well-practiced in relation to sound, less common or theorised is the phenomenon of image or action problematising the binary. For instance, Hayward describes how the term trans-diegetic 'reveals that filmic sound, *unlike* the image, is not place-specific and delimited, and acts also to engulf the spectator in the filmic experience' (2007: 4; emphasis added).

I would argue that part of the critical innovation of *Fleabag* concerns the ability of the programme, in certain parts, to problematise the place-specificity of the image, in terms of where Fleabag is and who she is talking to through her use of the aside. Whilst the position of Fleabag as writer/actor obscures a clear passage from one sphere to the other, to a degree, most of the time within the programme, the binary is upheld: when characters speak to their fellow scene characters they do so within the diegetic world of the show, and when Fleabag speaks to the camera, the action moves to that of the non-diegetic sphere. However, a significant moment of trans-diegesis occurs in the second season when the priest actually notices Fleabag turning to the

camera. This initially happens in the third episode after a moment of particular intensity. On hearing her mutter to the camera the priest asks her 'What was that? Where did you just go?' This gradual acknowledging of her deflections is expanded in the fourth episode, on a couple of occasions. The first takes place in the street when Fleabag comments on the priest's 'beautiful neck', a comment he hears and uncertainly questions her about. Somewhat unnerved, she denies the comment, claiming that she said something else. Unconvinced and a little confused, he changes the subject and they move on. When a similar occurrence happens later on in the episode, the priest presses her about it once again. This time she has nowhere to hide – her look to the camera was pronounced, requiring her to turn her head fully to its position behind her. Again he asks her what she is doing, to which she nervously and a little defensively replies: 'What?!' He responds: 'That thing you're doing, it's like you disappear'. Her blatant denial is undermined when, upon almost subconsciously risking another quick comment to the camera in front of her, the priest is propelled to follow her move, turning around quickly and looking straight down the lens of the camera, yelling a confused 'Aghhh!' in the process. Despite his look appearing more direct than his previous 'searching' looks to the camera, his cry appears to be one of frustration rather than discovered clarity.

It is the partiality of the priest's awareness which unsettles the spatial specificity of the programme's diegetic and non-diegetic world. The priest can both 'see' but also not 'see'. Of course, his awareness of Fleabag's deflections could be explained in terms of diegetic action: Fleabag has some sort of nervous habit of turning away and muttering to herself when faced with uncomfortable or emotionally charged situations. However, such an explanation is unsatisfying when considered in relation to the lack of prior reference to this in the preceding episodes. Indeed, Fleabag's use of the aside prior to this has very much followed the theatrical tradition whereby the other characters involved are oblivious to her 'breaking of the fourth wall'. In the programme, the other characters are presented as being *actually* oblivious, as opposed to pretending not to see a nervous habit for the sake of preserving Fleabag's feelings (as a diegetic explanation might explain). For such a reason the priest has entered into the liminal space of the trans-diegetic, a space closed off to everyone else in the programme – even Fleabag herself – neither firmly rooted within the fictional action nor in the non-diegetic world of the spectator. His noticing destabilises the clearly demarked spaces to which Fleabag has become accustomed. Suddenly she is exposed, her secret revealed.

The priest's awareness not only exposes the convention of the aside for what it is: an illusory plea to an invisible force which foregrounds the 'trajectory of the [TV] narrative in which they participate' (Brown, 2012: 172), but also enriches the narrative in terms of the characters' relationship. For instance, whilst there is ironic humour in the priest's exposing of Fleabag's 'illusion', there is also tenderness: the

fact that the only person who can 'see' what she 'sees' (if only partially) is the person to whom she feels the most spiritually and emotionally connected, potentially symbolises the strength of their alliance. It also hints at the potential for healing: no longer can Fleabag hide behind the comfort of the camera, dissociating 'from her own life whenever things get to be too much' (VanArendonk, 2019). In having the safety net removed, she must now confront the challenges of her diegetic world or risk further exposure, by the person she loves, of her deflections from 'real' life.

The multi-layered readings of the priest's noticing of Fleabag's aside – its ability to fuse form and content where 'direct address is used in synthesis with underlying themes' (Brown, 2012: 13) – functions to expand, innovate and enrich the form in a multi-dimensional manner. Anna Jane Parkinson (2019) describes the moment as an 'astonishing development which saw breaking-the-fourth-wall itself broken' and how she could not 'remember ever seeing this as a device […] the most unexpected television twist in recent years'. Brown suggests that there does not have to be a 'contradiction between our emotional involvement with fictional characters and their addressing us through the apparatus of the camera. Precisely the opposite: direct address may enrich our appreciation of the fiction and its characters' (2012: 18). Indeed, the priest may 'see' not only as a result of his growing connection with Fleabag, but also as a 'man of the cloth.' His spiritual predilections potentially imbue him with an ability to see 'beyond' that of the diegetic and non-diegetic world and enter the liminal world of the trans-diegetic. Subsequently, the use of trans-diegesis functions to expand and layer our understanding of the characters within the narrative of the show. Alexandra Pollard describes how it 'makes sense that in the second series [sic] the character found herself drawn to a Catholic priest' (2019). Another sophisticated fusion of form and content: the asides acquiring additional significance and resonance in relation to their confessional nature within the narrative.

Trans-diegetic imagery also occurs in the second episode of the first season. We see Fleabag sitting on a London Underground train when she suddenly witnesses her co-passengers having momentary, simultaneous seizures, punctuated by a beat in a piece of music which is heard. A befuddled look to the other side of the train presents Fleabag seeing exactly the same thing happening: everyone on the tube appears to be seizing up in choreographic fashion at the exact same point without appearing to notice anyone else doing it, without apparent consciousness that they are doing it themselves, and without an apparent awareness of the music that conveniently punctuates and frames their movements. We assume that the music is a score, and hence non-diegetic because music is not usually heard on public transport. The fact that the people on the tube are not wearing headphones suggests that this is not a 'flash mob' - a momentary, pre-determined and organised performance presented in a public place intended to surprise unwitting bystanders – and hence part of the diegetic world of the fiction. If, however, the music is a score, the question remains as to why

(and how) the (diegetic) characters' movements appear to be responding to it. The movement synthesis is not incidental (as might occur with conventional music scores) but choreographic in terms of being perfectly timed to particular beats. If trans-diegesis refers to a propensity to 'cross the border of the diegetic to the non-diegetic' whilst 'remaining unspecific' (Hayward, 2007: 3), we might see such an instance occurring here.

The lack of any kind of awareness by the characters involved raises questions as to whether any of it is, in fact, happening. The sequence is bookended by Fleabag announcing to the camera that she 'thinks she has her period'. Such a statement suggests that the moment is a manifestation of her internal world, to which only she and the audience are privy. As a potential revealing of her interiority, the moment remains trans-diegetic in terms of its uncertainty: it appears neither 'inside' or 'outside' of the fiction. In a manner following that of the aside, the other characters are oblivious to what Fleabag and the audience can see, despite being the ones involved in the supposed action. The difference between this moment and the previously seen asides is that it is not simply non-diegetic commentary on an objective, diegetic scene but rather another layer appears to be presented: that of the internal world of Fleabag. In this sense the subjective arena is the site of the trans-diegetic, being neither fully diegetic nor non-diegetic. The place-specificity of the image therefore becomes unsettled once again, in a manner following Hayward's definition of trans-diegetic sound. Stilwell suggests that a common strategy to draw an audience to a character is 'a trajectory through the fantastical gap between the diegetic and non-diegetic, along multiple axes including empathy/anempathy, objectivity/subjectivity' (2007: 193). The fact that the audience shares Fleabag's 'hallucination' suggests a certain empathy more commonly associated with non-diegetic sound or the previously mentioned aside to camera. However, it is also diegetic to the extent that it is presented as something experienced by Fleabag at a particular moment within her fictional world. Subsequently, the fact that it is only Fleabag and the audience who are aware of this moment, problematises a coherent assessment.

Concerning the difficulty of locating certain songs within the film musical, Nina Penner suggests that 'virtually all numbers, whether realistic or fantastical, are diegetic […] They are part of the film's fictional world as well as its story' (2017:12). She suggests that 'possible exceptions would include instances where the number, in whole or in part, is framed as a character's dream, imagining, or hallucination' (Penner, 2017:12). Such devices can also be found in comedic forms where interruptions to the narrative can be seen through fantasy beats often symbolising the internal thoughts of a character, which then cut back to the 'norm' – see *Scrubs* (Bill Lawrence, 2001-2010, NBC/ABC) or *The Mighty Boosh* (Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding, 2004-2007, BBC). What differentiates the use of the device in this moment

from more conventional dream or fantasy sequences is a lack of signification provided regarding its function up until the moment of the 'punchline'; its uncommon use within the form of a dramedy and the fact that it only happens once. The line about Fleabag's period functions to comedically 'explain' the previously uncertain moment, presenting it as a visual gag and aligning the moment with more familiar comedic tropes. However, up until this point it is unclear as to how this moment should be read. This is exacerbated by the fact that, stylistically, the act of turning inwards (as opposed to outwards) the interiority of Fleabag's psyche has never happened before. Subsequently an audience must navigate this stylistic shift within the confines of the dramedic form to which they have become accustomed thus far. This device is only used once within the whole series and its refusal to become a repeatable and familiar convention potentially contributes to the way in which it functions to disorientate and unsettle the viewer. Again, there is a fusion of form and content here: we are not simply invited visually into the mind of Fleabag to get closer to her but are rather presented with an experience of her world that tries to match how she is feeling at that particular moment; our uncertainty and instability in relation to what we are watching mirrors the physiological state of the character. Fleabag's witnessing of the scene, as something she is also uncertain about, functions to further align her with the viewer. In fact, the punchline seems to result from her prior uncertainty as a way to not only explain to the audience, but also to herself, what might be occurring. For Penner the diegetic/non- diegetic binary is an insufficient tool to measure the nuanced and layered ways in which the interplay of both spheres within the film musical can function to both enhance narrative meaning and intensify aesthetic experience. A similar complexity can also be discerned through Waller-Bridge's destabilisation of the image, contributing to the sophistication of her writing.

Whilst there is a reliance on sound within this scene to create the intended effect, compared with the previous scene involving trans-diegetic imagery, it is not wholly dependent upon it. For instance, the effect could actually be achieved without sound. Subsequently, I maintain that the innovation within this section resides in its experimentation with trans-diegetic imagery as opposed to trans-diegetic sound. Aurality within this scene is used as a prop to enhance the choreographic movement. It is not an integral narrative device. In this moment trans-diegetic imagery occurs through a lack of certainty regarding the placement or existence of the action in relation to the narrative. To finish, in an objective (and coherent) diegetic world, the characters would probably all be sitting silently on the tube, minding their own business. What is therefore presented is a kind of visual gag which problematises the specificity of people and places, presenting a destabilised image of Fleabag's experience through a cross-fertilisation of image and sound.

Conclusion

Examination of the developed use of direct address within Waller-Bridge's television series *Fleabag* has demonstrated how forms of experimentation within the writing, in particular its use of diegetic/non-diegetic and trans-diegetic imagery, position the work as an example of 'the boundary-pushing feminist potential of female-authored comedy' (Woods, 2015: 4). Such innovation functions to enhance and layer the narrative, as well as cultivating perceptions of performer/audience connection. Such perceptions are compounded by the presence and agency of Waller-Bridge as writer, actor and character. This amalgam is nurtured through the fictional construct of Fleabag entering into the actual world of the viewer through direct address, reminding them of their own presence outside of the action and, in turn, of Waller-Bridge as creator of the show. However, the divide between fiction and reality is not as clean cut as is perhaps prescribed within Birke and Warhol's 'dramatic mode', where audiences are addressed unauthored or un-situated within the fiction. The act of crossing the line between fiction and reality is, to a degree, obfuscated as a result of the relationship between Waller-Bridge and Fleabag. When she speaks to the viewer the feeling of intimacy and collusion is potentially accompanied by one of authenticity as we perceive her to be confiding in 'us', not simply as a fictional character, but real-life creator of that character, with the potential autobiographical dimension that might be involved. We are invited to share parts of her 'authentic' self, as agent of the work. Her relatively unknown presence as an actor may have contributed to these autobiographical impressions, as viewers may have perceived the then new face as an authentic representation of the person who is putting pen to paper. In this sense, applying the binary of diegetic/non- diegetic to these moments is problematised and the assumed fixity of each position must be considered in relation to how the supposed diegetic/non- diegetic world is being configured.

The binary is further problematised through the use of trans-diegetic imagery: an approach more commonly prevalent in relation to the use of sound on screen. When the character of the priest notices Fleabag's deflections to an invisible force, the partiality of his awareness unsettles the spatial specificity of the programme's diegetic and non-diegetic world: whilst the priest sees 'something,' he does not see 'us' or a camera. Such an approach expands conventional understandings of the term, often positing that 'filmic sound, *unlike* the image, is not place-specific and delimited' (Hayward: 2007: 4). The lack of specificity regarding the priest's 'locatedness' at this moment within the action contravenes such sentiments. The material is therefore pushing the boundaries of the form by unlocking the specificity of the image. This produces material which is rich and multi-layered: the subversion of established conventions functions to not only shift the perspective of what the audience think they are watching, but also to enhance the narrative itself. The use of trans-diegetic action is further explored through the inversion of Fleabag's psyche in the London Underground scene. Here the approach has parallels with moments from film

musicals or certain comedic forms which shift into fantasy or dream sequences. In a similar manner to the film musical, it is difficult to speak of this moment in terms of the diegetic/non- diegetic binary due to the action seeming to both take place and not take place within the narrative. This stylistic shift within the form of the dramedy and lack of explanation for what might be happening prior to the 'punchline' potentially de-stabilises the viewer, in a manner mirroring the subjective state of the character at that moment, further aligning character/viewer connectivity.

A friend of mine recently expressed disappointment at the disparity in quality between high-end, high-budget American prestige dramas and their British counterparts. The discussions within this article go some way to refuting this commonly held assumption, proving that the creative outputs by homegrown female newcomers, often involving low budgets (by comparison), writers who perform in their own work and often involving inventive, 'genre bending' approaches, can more than hold their own in a contest for exceptional 'quality' programming. This predicament seems to be increasing as we see more and more British female writers taking their pens, representing their experience and proving their worth on the 'small' screen. Fresh narratives representing the unique stories of women from writers who have agency over their creative outputs are increasing, with talent such as Aisling Bea, Sophie Willan and Daisy Haggard following in the footsteps of Horgan, Coel and Waller-Bridge. This slow growth is occurring at a time when British broadcasting companies are confronting and refining their remits as public service broadcasters in response to increasing competition from American streaming services. Tara Conlan, outlining BBC Studios' chief creative officer, Mark Linsey, (2019), describes how: 'Investing in new and emerging talent to tell quintessential British stories is at the heart of BBC Studios' intellectual property strategy, as well as being crucial to the continued success and performance of our production output." In this sense the wider agenda to extend equality and diversity on and off screen, seen in campaigns such as the BBC's 50:50 Equality Project or in the results of 2019 New Writers Academy (Conlan, 2019) seems to be both cultural and economic.

As a writer/performer caught within a broader context of female authored comedy, I have developed and built upon existing knowledge which outlines the contribution made by Waller-Bridge to the ways in which increasing representations of women on and behind the screen can be seen as a positive development for feminism (Perkins, 2019). In many ways the discoveries made by Waller-Bridge and myself are the result of a process of cross pollination: a shift in mediums for both of us, from theatre to television. For instance, the astutely adapted theatrical convention of the aside made by Waller-Bridge, functions, not simply as a stylistic 'trick', but to deepen and layer narrative meaning, intensify character identification and enhance audience engagement through a fusion of form and content, building on and extending prior innovation within TV fiction. As Newcomb suggests, when intimacy is developed as

a conceptual tool, the union of form and content leads to a sense of excellence in television drama (1974: 250). This level of sophistication functions not only to *recognise* 'women's agency as creators in the "Peak TV" landscape' (Perkins, 2019: 919) but to *extend and expand* it.

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