The Trickster in Serial Television:
An Anti-hero of Postmodern Mythologies

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Abstract

Anti-heroes have become prevalent on the television home screen since the advent of cable in the late 90s. But the shift to Quality TV made the anti-hero even more dominant in its complex narratives. In order to understand why, I had to identify what an anti-hero really is. Carl Gustav Jung's theory of the archetypes is one of the most comprehensive and referenced theories when it comes to character development and screenwriting, but the more complex contemporary narratives are becoming, the more the theory is proving to be outdated. However, a particularly perplexing Jungian archetype stands out: the trickster-figure. The investigation into the definition of the trickster yielded different attributes that render it a highly postmodern concept. This dissertation aims at identifying the contemporary TV anti-hero as the mythical player of tricks. Through a survey of 21st century semiotics, structural and poststructural theories, as well as contemporary theories on character and engagement in Serial TV consumption and "binge" culture, this dissertation aims to show how the trickster-figure is as relevant today as it was in ancient times.

Keywords: Anti-hero, Trickster, Quality TV, (Post) Structuralism, Postmodernism.

I. Introduction: Mythology in the ancient and the postmodern

I did not know how to become anything: neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero, nor an insect.
-- Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1864. *Notes from Underground*

The objective of this dissertation is to understand the concept of the anti-hero in contemporary serial television through the lens of the mythological trickster-figure. The discussion will be conducted under the framework of structural, post-structural, and contemporary TV theory. The central aim is to understand what makes the anti-hero as trickster so dominant as an emerging trend in a hyper-industrial market that is contemporary Quality TV.

In *The Birth of the Binge* (a book I will be referencing over and over), TV theorist, Dennis Broe, classifies this postmodern form of televised entertainment as Quality, Complex, or Serial TV to be differentiated from cable, and pre-cable era television. Since the rise of cable TV and the VOD and SVOD platforms, the complexities of narratives and production have been a staple of this contemporary form of Serial TV (Broe 2019, 8-10). Part of this narrative complexity is reflected in complex and multi-layered protagonists that have come to be called anti-heroes. In her essay on the TV anti-hero, Chloe Liddy-Judge affirms that he 'good guy' as hero gets its roots from Plato's *Republic* where he attributed to the hero of dramatic works the highest morals in order to preserve the moral structure of society (Liddy-Judge 2013, 1-2). But in the postmodern era (where Platonic ideas have grown out of fashion), groundbreaking Quality/Complex/Serial TV shows such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019)*, Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-present), and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018)*,* (to name a few) have put morally ambiguous characters as protagonists of typically grim storylines and thus created a more thought-provoked, cultured, and predominantly urban consumer base (Vaage 2016, xiii).

But what exactly constitutes an anti-hero? In the chapter on laughter and tricksters in rogue pamphlets of the 16th and 17th century, Lena Liapi discusses how criminal characters were introduced into short fictions as a way of 'othering' the poor and underprivileged in an urbanizing London in an attempt to maintain hegemonic and state order (Liapi 2013, 53-54). She goes on to discuss how rogues and tricksters (some of whom have stark resemblance to mythical tricksters such as Reynard the Fox) became emblematic of urban life where the lack of morals, deceit, and trickery are the means of coping with changing social and economic realities (63-66). What we can understand from Liapi's chapter is that the anti-hero's emergence in literary tradition came in the wake of modernity. But a proper definition of an anti-hero is tricky by nature, for it can mean anything that is not the typical, moral, likable, and even sometimes invincible hero. Vaage sees that the anti-hero in contemporary television is not simply flawed as all humans are, rather she finds these anti-heroes to be generally immoral (Vaage 2016, xi-xii). Anti-heroes often exist within a spectrum of morality - between good and evil - because essentially they follow their own agenda without much regard to moral and societal codes. In their study on viewer engagement, and after failing to come up with a proper definition of the anti-hero, Shafer and Raney put it simply: "Traditional heroes do not have moral flaws. Anti-heroes do, and these flaws play a role in the unfolding drama." (Shafer and Raney 2012, 1030)

It is my central claim that mythological symbolism still operates unconsciously in the way we understand narrative, and these symbols operate (sometimes inversely) in the cultural texts that have become so dominant in postmodernity; i.e. Serial TV. By these symbols I mean basic archetypes of story and

character that have much to do with the theories laid out by Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung.

In an effort to better understand the postmodern TV anti-hero I took Carl Jung's theory on character archetypes as the main analytical framework. Carl Gustav Jung's theories on archetypes and the collective unconscious have been regarded as fundamental in the understanding and construction of basic stories. Christopher Vogler, a prominent American screenwriter, discusses Jung's theories in his book on screenwriting, *The Writer's Journey,* where he relies heavily on the writings of Jung as well as Joseph Campell in discussing the popular understanding the psychological relationships humans have with archetypal stories (Vogler 1999, 6-7). Jung's psychoanalytic theories on the self posit that the unconscious mind has two substrates one of which is the collective unconscious; which is the realm that is shared collectively and that has been inherited through narrative traditions from generation to generation since the earliest days of our existence as a species. The mythologies we have told and heard over time have been bottled and stacked in the collective unconscious and appear in a symbolic nature in our conscious life as well as in dreams. Archetypes exist within this realm and they are ideal absolute forms of character types with similarities with the Platonic theory of forms (Campbell 2002, 3-5). Volger further elaborates that:

> The archetypes are amazingly constant throughout all times and cultures, in the dreams and personalities of individuals as well as in the mythic imagination of the entire world. An understanding of these forces is one of the most powerful elements in the modern storyteller's bag of tricks. (Vogler 1999, 25)

An essential Jungian archetype is the trickster-figure. The mythical trickster is known to be a trouble-maker and a lover of pleasures; food, sex, and a good laugh. The fool understands the meaninglessness of life, but has to play games and joke to cope with it. The jester, through her/his mischief and spontaneity, can bring about a change in the state of the world (easing away sadness through laughter and play); the idiot can reinterpret the world in many different ways and often turns out to be an unlikely hero. The trickster can often be found as an anthropomorphic figure such as the Egyptian god Theuth or the Native American coyote. In other instances they have shapeshifting powers, such as the Nordic god Loki. These traits, as well as the affinity to laughter and play, renders the trickster a being of a contradictory and indeterminate nature (Hynes and Doty 1997, 1-13).

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The first part of this dissertation looks at language and meaning through the lense of semiology and the cultural sign. A discussion of symbols, floating signifiers, and binaries of opposition further highlights the concept of the anti-hero as the symbolic trickster-figure. From a structural standpoint, the difference between deep and surface narrative structures will be highlighted by looking at the *Hero's Journey* as an archetypal deep structure. In the aim of understanding how meaning can be derived from the study of myth, we will look at the works of two structuralists: Claude-Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes; Lévi-Strauss, with his scientific approach of analyzing meaning-creating oppositions (in which the trickster-figure comes into play), and Barthes, with his semiotic approach to understanding the transformation of signs and symbols in myths of popular culture. Finally, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and grammatology through the *pharmakon* brings us closer to the structural concept of oppositional binaries and the philosophical concept of indeterminacy. The second part goes into a discussion of character from a narratological and psychological standpoint. Here two opposing theories are discussed: character as functions of a narrative text (structural) and character as an evolving being that occupies time within a narrative space (poststructural). With reference to John Yorke's screenwriting book *Into the Woods,* and Jung's theory of the self, persona, and shadow, a discussion of internal conflict and character self-actualization will reveal that modern approaches to character study are often more psychological than structural. The discussion then turns to how the time/space paradigm in postmodern narratives of hyper-industrialization yields a growing engagement with the consumer/viewer. Through research conducted on seriality and TV culture, engagement theories will be discussed in relation to anti-hero narratives through experiments conducted by Shafer and Raney under the framework of the Affective Disposition Theory. Finally a conclusion aims at underlining the relevance and appeal of trickers in the hyper-industrial market of quality TV as well as the indeterminate postmodern reality of the present age.

II: The Flexibility of Structure

The cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas is now done by laundry-detergent commercials and comic-strip characters
-- Roland Barthes, 1972. *Mythologies*

Language, semiotics, and reality/ies

Much of the discussion around structural theory has its roots in linguistics and semiotics. John R. Searle maintains in his book *Making the Social World* that language is the ontological source behind the construction of social reality and the institutions that facilitate cooperation between humans in large numbers. Searle's main argument is that the social world is constructed through the use of collectively agreed upon 'functions' attributed to objects and individuals in society. This collective agreement, Searle argues, is a result of a shared language (Searle 2010, 7). Later on he elaborates that language is the primal carrier of meaning, used in a performative and/or literary form (spoken or written) to communicate - and create - the consciousness of our species. But the function of language itself can be broken down into its different facets. Searle dissects language into

three aspects: phonology (the sounds associated to it), syntax (the structural composition or worlds and sentences) and semantics (the meanings that can be derived from it) (64-65). Semantics of language is the main point of interest - how meaning is created/interpreted - a study that was first cemented by Ferdinand de Saussure at the turn of the century. The structural study of language that developed from Saussure's works is called semiotics.

Semiotics is the science that goes into the relation between the elements that form a linguistic 'sign' or a representation of meaning. Saussure coined these elements as 'signifier' or the concept in question and the 'signified' which is the 'sound-image' that relates to the concept, ie the word (eg. *tree)*. Together, the signifier and the signified form a 'sign'. Hawkes affirms that the sign is almost always arbitrary, meaning that it has no formal relation to the signified concept (the word tree does not look or sound like a tree). This is proven by the fact that when you change a language, the sign changes but the concept remains the same (Hawkes 1977, 13). Therefore the study of signs seems to suggest that our relation with the real world is not fixed in the objects constituting the world, rather with our (constructed) relations with these objects. Hawkes draws a list of three different modes of relations in which a 'sign' stands for an 'object' according to a specific circumstance or 'ground'. The second of these 'triadic' relations is that of the icon, index, and symbol. Hawkes writes:

'Triadic relations of performance' involving actual entities in the real world, based on the kind of ground. These are the icon, something which functions as a sign by means of features of itself which resemble its object; the index, something which functions as a sign by virtue of some sort of factual or causal connection with its object; and the symbol, something which functions as a sign because of some 'rule' of conventional or habitual association between itself and its object. (Hawkes 1977, 104)

A symbol is essentially a sign, but with the difference that symbols seem to be linked to the object or concept of reference through some kind of convention or law. Jung claims that these conventions are often inherited through centuries of cultural narrative traditions. The ontology of these conventions can be of pre-existing cultural, social, or personal significance though they may adhere to some form of arbitrariness, "symbols in the popular sense are 'never wholly arbitrary': they 'show at least a vestige of natural connection' between the signifier and the signified." (Chandler 2002, 39). Archetypes, ideals, and forms can be seen to function in almost the same way in the sense that they are absolute symbolic representations of a certain concept or idea. But how is meaning derived from signs in general? In semiology, meaning is often seen to be created through binaries and oppositions, where it is seen that the meaning of a certain concept or idea is often derived through the exclusion of its opposite: "the meaning of 'dark' is relative to the meaning of 'light'; 'form' is inconceivable except in relation to 'content'".

(91-92). Here we slowly cross the line between structural and poststructural theory.

Another term in semiotics I find to be utterly significant for our study are 'empty' or 'floating' signifiers. Briefly, these are signifiers that do not relate to a specific object or concept and thus are open to many different interpretations (eg. is the word 'mana' found in myths and fables; the word can mean many different things and it's not fixed to one signified). Much of postmodern (and poststructural) theory relies heavily on the concept of the floating signifier, from Lacan to Baudrillard (*simulacra* and *simulation*) to Derrida (*freeplay* or *jeu*) (78-82). Considering the fact that a floating signifier is open to a multiplicity of interpretations renders it in line with postmodern thought and the multiplicity of truth. We will soon see that tricksters are symbolically considered floating signifiers in their mythical reading due to their indeterminate characteristics. According to Fredric Jameson, today's hyperindustrial media industry (and cultural texts in general) have been overloaded with a massive intensification of the flow of symbols that has paradoxically created an overwhelming 'massive desymbolization' or an indeterminacy in the meaning created by these 'hyperaccelerated sign systems'[1].

Deep structures and the reading of myth

In an age of groundbreaking seriality and complex narratives and characters, it is the deconstruction and re-assembling of structure that is so descriptive of complex storytelling via Quality TV (Broe 2019, 3). Structuralists studied the relation between structure and narrative, as well as between story and discourse. Story is the *events* of a narrative whereas discourse is the *way* a story is laid out (Fludernik 2006, 21-26). According to Rimmon-Kenan, narrative structures come in two forms: *deep* and *surface*. While the surface structure relates to story events (of which character is considered to be a constituent), the deep structure refers to a more limited set of features that make up almost all archetypal stories. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 11). Deep structures often relate to archetypal structures as they seem to carry the same overall discourse. One of the best examples of deep structure in a popular sense is the archetypal hero's journey.

In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell identifies *the hero's journey;* an archetypal story of a hero who receives a call to adventure, crosses the threshold to a dark new world away from the safety of home, fights the shadow and retrieves the elixir that will bring salvation to the world. The hero, victorious, returns home and brings about a new age (Campbell, 2002). The hero's journey is manifested in countless popular stories and films. When stripped down to its bare structure, the hero's journey is the archetypal story of life, death and rebirth. In a symbolic sense, it is the story of a quest to the unknown and then the return. Dan Harmon, creator and showrunner of *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, 2013-present) has been credited with using the 'story circle' to structure the episodes of the show. He uses the story circle structure on the multiple storylines of each episode to

create an intricate web of events that sometimes seem too over-the-top to grasp. In the end, the story circle is just a variation of the hero's journey (StudioBinder, 2019). The hero's journey can also be read on a psychological level, for it is often considered to be a character's journey towards self-actualization (more on this in part II).

Lévi-Strauss uses the deep structures found in ancient stories and fables in his scientific approach to the study of myths (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 15). His method, which is presented in detail in *Structural Study of Myth* maintains that *deep narrative* structures of myths are made up of blocks of narrative (or mythemes) whose combination stems from a binary of opposites. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 438). Lévi-Strauss found that the meaning of a mythological narrative is derived through structural elements in opposition. He relates this finding with the characters of raven or coyote who, in Native American folklore are considered to be mythological tricksters due to the fact that both animals are scavengers; mediators between life and death. Lévi-Strauss saw these binary structures to reflect an innate human behaviorism in the mind that connects meaning to opposition in the same light as expressed earlier[2].

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes discusses how the use of myth as symbol can be propagated by dominant ideologies (specifically *bourgeois* ideologies) to reinforce societal norms and order. In his chapter *Myth Today*, Barthes discusses myth in a contemporary reading. He analyses the semantics of symbolic signs (the signifier and signified) in a specific image - he uses examples from newspaper headlines and magazine covers. He argues that a dominant ideology can manipulate a symbol to retain a certain meaning. This is achieved by blurring the concept or the signifier, thus rendering it 'empty' or 'floating' (Barthes 1972, 139). An example of this is the iconic stencil image of Che Guevara. Used as a symbol of leftist revolt and anti-establishment movements, it has become a brand of consumerist commodities *par excellence*. But the symbol remains dominant and used by many as a 'safety blanket mythology'. Barthes concludes that symbols, like language, are not fixed in meaning, they are slippery and flexible. He discusses this by drawing up a list of 'rhetorical figures' to which the different forms of signifiers arrange themselve in right-wing bourgois mythologies. In a list of seven, the fifth is the one that again recapitulates contradiction and indeterminacy, what Barthes calls 'neither-norism'. "By this I mean this mythological figure which consists in stating two opposites and balancing the one by the other so as to reject them both. (I want neither this nor that.) It is on the whole a bourgeois figure, for it relates to a modern form of liberalism." (154)

Deconstruction and the pharmakon

Jacques Derrida, a pioneer of poststructuralist thought, took the idea of semiotic opposition further by highlighting the assumed historical privilege of one opposite over another, such good over evil, being over non-being, presence over absence, even speech over writing. He refuted historical privileging for he saw meaning to exist within the relation between the two opposites; in a sense refuting the traditional privileging of the 'material' over the 'immaterial'. An example is his privileging of writing over speech. He deconstructs the semiotics of language and writing in one of his most prominent works, *Of Grammatology* where he discusses the phenomenology of presence and absence in writing. Derrida pleads for the privilege of writing over speech because speech gives an illusion of 'metaphysical presence' whereas writing is 'materially present' and thus preserves thoughts and ideas in a more dependable way. Writing also allows for the reader's interpretation to add to the meaning of the text. In doing this, "Derrida sought to blur the distinction between signifier and signified, insisting that 'the signified always already functions as a signifier'" (Chandler 2002, 100). This shatters the structure of the signifier itself for even the word 'tree' can refer to different *kinds* of trees. Therefore even the meaning of a linguistic sign is never fixed.

But some signs are more indeterminate than others. Derrida makes his idea of inderminancy clear in *Plato's Pharmacy* where he brings to light the concept -and the word- *Pharmakon*. In the story relayed by Plato in *Phaedrus*, the Egyptian god of magic, Theuth offers the king a *pharmakon*, an elixir of memory: writing. But like the English word 'drug', it is both the cure and the poison for writing does preserve memory in the same way as it facilitates the loss of memory. The *pharmakon* is an example of a semiotically indeterminate word, a floating signifier, undecidable, and inhabiting a dual nature[3]. Hawkes considers this contradiction to exist within a spectrum of 'play/jue' of signifiers. (Hawkes 1977, 120). Broe mentions the concept of the *pharmakon* in his discussion of Quality TV where a contradiction is seemingly inherent; complex TV presents itself as a more cultured form of television that inspires writers, producers, and audiences to engage with complex narratives and break free from networked structures and conventions. In turn it has created an addicted audience and a culture of binge that "fetishize complexity but as an antidote to a mind-numbing form of mass celebrification." (Broe 2019, 4).

Zombies are an example of fictional inderminant beings that became prominant in popular culture. The zombie is an embodiment of a dual-natured being; neither dead nor alive. Zombies have existed in cultural fables, myths and stories around the world, but only in the 1930s did they make their way to western culture. It has been seen that the 'outbreak of zombieism' took place in the 20th century, but in the 21st century, more than 600 zombie movies have been made since 1920, more than half of them being made in the last 10 years[4]. Another Derridian concept to make its way into popular culture of late capitalism is the concept hauntology, specifically when it comes to epoch aesthetic revivalism; when the past haunts the present and deletes the future[5]. Revivalism can be found in many contemporary cultural texts as well as in music. An example of this is the 80 aesthetics in shows like *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-present).

Both zombies and revivalism are both tropes of the creeping indeterminacy of postmodern pop culture. But apart from supernatural creatures such as ghosts and zombies, indeterminacy can be traced back to mythic traditions of trickster narratives. Anne Doueihi writes that the intrigue of trickster myths is that they are open to multiple interpretations, none of which is 'correct'. "A "signified" - a local unit functioning in a specific field where it makes meaning possible - turns out to be only a "signifier" and functions as a signifier. Language loses its referential value and becomes profound. On the other hand, the story loses its solidity and breaks down into an open-ended play of signifiers. Language becomes a semiotic activity." (Doueihi 1997, 199)

III: On Character and the Human Condition

Theuth is thus the father's other, the father, and himself. He cannot be assigned a fixed location in this play. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a wild card, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card. One who puts play into play.
-- Jeff Collins, 1997. *An Introduction to Derrida: A Graphic Guide*

Character: psychological entity or functional agent?

As mentioned earlier, characters exist within the surface structure of narrative. There are two different discourses or 'schools' of thought when it comes to theory of character in narratology. The 'purist' school sees character as an element of a story, meaning that it is only a functional agent within the structure. Another approach sees characters as psychological entities that exist beyond the words a discourse ascribes to them; thus characters can have a past and a future beyond the story (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 42). Chatman, in *Story and Discourse,* points to Aristotle's Chapter II of *Poetics,* where he sees that the Aristotelian 'purist' approach opts for a functional agent with only one trait within binary of opposites: the agent "must either be noble or base, since human character regularly conforms to these distinctions, all of us being different in character because of some quality of goodness or evil." (Chatman 1978, 108) Some structuralists do not really deviate from this approach. Propp saw characters in fables as easily categorized into specific groups, such as: the hero, the villain, the maiden, the herald[6]... Barthes, however, is more inclined towards the complexities of the modern narrative, what Chatman calls, an 'open theory of character'. "Both character and event are logically necessary to narrative; where chief interest falls is a matter of the changing taste of authors and their publics. The contemplation of character is the predominant pleasure in modern art narrative." (113).

Barthes undertook a major structural study of the novel *Sarrasine* by Balzac in order to decipher the codes that make up a reader's 'phenomenological' interpretation of a narrative. Barthes believes a text to be flexible rather than static, meaning that a reader's interpretation is often what creates the meaning of the text upon reading. This happens through the interpretations of enigmatic symbolic codes that are scattered all around the cultural text at hand. In relation to character, Barthes was able to extract certain symbolic codes, which he calls 'semes' that help in establishing character through traits, dress, emotions and modes of speech. These symbolic codes, Broe adds, define character based on opposition, "and which also may work against the text by transgressively suggesting that these opposites may be more alike than we imagine." Broe suggests that this erratic play of enigmatic symbols often put the viewer in a state of high anxiety due to indeterminacy claiming that this 'hyperaddictive' condition is descriptive of post 9/11 serial TV (Broe 2019, 88-89).

When it comes to contemporary serial TV, there seems to be a more diverse discussion about character to go against the Platonic 'purist' approach of character as function. EM Forster's theory of *flat* and *round* character elaborates that round characters evolve within the narrative, often changing, adopting new traits or losing old ones (Forster 1956, 48-54). In *Complex TV,* John Mittel argues that TV characters are often a result of collaborations between actors, producers, and writers whose personal experiences as well as developmental positions within the series stretches over time and space to create a multi-faceted dimension to their onscreen characters. This is to the extent that actors' personal lives often sift into the storylines of their characters; e.g. when characters are killed off due to an actor's unavailability. (Mittel 2016, 119). In *Understanding Characters,* Jen Eder defines characters as "identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artifacts" (Eder 2016, 18). Giles discusses the psychological relationship between TV characters and their consumerist viewership. He claims that viewers often create a 'parasocial' connection with onscreen characters which drives them to identify with and project onto characters their desires, wants and fears. (Giles 2016, 442) And Smith asserts this by the mimetic aspect of characters, in that they mimic real human beings, for unlike humans, fictional characters lack agency. However, the reason why characters become engaging to viewers is purely psychological for "Narratives shape our experience of characters in terms of our informational alignment with them, that is, in terms of the degree to which we are spatially attached, and given subjective access, to them." (Smith 2016, 234). In a sense, through the above exhibition of erratically different conceptualization of fictional characters, it seems that theories of character take on a more psychoanalytical tone in (post) modern narratives.

Screenwriting and Carl Jung

We have previously mentioned that Jung derived many of his ideas from his study of world mythologies and the archetypes Jung extracted are patterns seen in mythological characters. Jung was able to derive twelve archetypes that reside in the collective unconscious. He found that these twelve mythical archetypes

together represent the full range of human motivation.[7] Archetypes can be closely likened to symbols, for they function in the same way; they are not constant or rigid, their meaning is induced through interpretation and circumstance "like masks" (Vogler 1999, 25). In his chapter dedicated to the Trickster-figure, Jung writes:

> ...his fondness for **sly jokes** and **malicious pranks**, his powers as a **shape-shifter**, his **dual nature**, half animal, half divine, his exposure to all kinds of tortures, and—last but not least—his approximation to the figure of a **saviour**.... His rogueries relate him in some measure to various figures met with in folklore and universally known in fairytales...who is an altogether **negative hero** and yet manages to achieve through his stupidity what others fail to accomplish with their best efforts." (Jung 1959, 256)

In *Into the Woods*, a book on scriptwriting and the archetypal narrative journey, Yorke expresses that a more internally conflicted character will yield a more narratively complex story for conflict begets dilemma, and dilemma is inherently what it is to be human. He draws a comparison in his chapter on character between dramatic agents and human psychology. He claims that almost all humans struggle with their representation in the eyes of others, a struggle between who they really are and who they wish to be perceived in society. Jungian psychoanalysis calls this external representation the *persona*. According to Jung, the persona is the image of the self that is exposed to society. Any individual -considering they are not sociopaths - wants to give the best image of themselves to others in society, while suppressing their *shadow* (Yorke 2013, 128-134). Jung considers the trickster-figure to be a 'shadow' that helps surface the opposite side of dominant values. "Breaking through into the world of normalcy and order, the trickster plays out subterranean forbiddens in dreamlike fashion." (Hynes 1997, 210-211). He further elaborates that the trickster is symbolic of the fugue between the conscious realm of the mind and the unconscious realm, further emphasizing a process of acquiring a higher state of consciousness or self-actualization. Yorke argues that self-actualization is what prompts all character, fictitious or real, to do what they do[8]. In his chapter on characterization, Yorke gives examples of characters on a quest of self-actualization that vary from Michael Corleone in the *Godfather* (Paramount Pictures, 1972) to David Brent in *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003). All these characters have in common is a dual personality; who they *are* and who they want to *become* (Yorke 2013, 136-137). Yorke ends his chapter on character with the following line: "It's perhaps telling, then, that a serial killer should be a superhero of our times" (134).

Time/space continuum: seriality and viewer engagement

Time is the ultimate factor when the question of viewer engagement comes into play. Time operates on two levels; the first being in the creation and sustainment of serialized content for a mass market, the second level deals with viewer engagement, recently dubbed 'binge' culture of late capitalist viewership. According to Buchholz in her essay of media seriality, the episodic structure in new media, with the help of the internet, has given rise to the privileging of space over time in the sense that a story world can now branch out atemporally across many different platforms to create a more complex and engaging viewer experience (Buchholz 2014, 38). She draws a comparison between the technological advancement in Victorian print and contemporary serial TV. The ever evolving storyworld is one of the characteristic features of Quality TV, according to Broe, and it comes in the form of at least one season and a multi character story arch, "In narratological terms this may be referred to as the metanarrative, or "metadiegesis," which may dominate the individual story, or "diegesis"." (Broe 2019, 175).

Therefore meaning can only be interpreted through the syntax of a language, its sequence through time. Can the same be said about viewer engagement with fictional characters? In narrative theory, time is considered the main driver of a narrative, for it places the events and characters temporarily in an evolving storyworld. (Fludernik 2006, 31) It has been seen, through different frameworks of study, that technological advancements and the form of the narrative has had a deep effect in how the receiver of a fiction engages with it. In her book on the emergence and development of human rights, Hunt presents the epistolary novels (published in serial form and usually presented in the form of letters or diary entries) of the 18th century to be a defining moment in human empathy with fictional characters. She further elaborates that the central characters of these novels were of the middle class or lower and were able to bring forth the notion that human beings are fundamentally similar due to the sameness of their inner feelings (Hunt 2007, 38-39) But, Broe argues that, in today's hyperindustrial era of Quality TV, where information accumulation via the internet, the home mobile screen, and complex narratives, have inversely created a very well informed but socially inept individual with more likeness to a machine (Broe 2019, 76-77).

Two concepts that deal with viewer engagement with narratives are ADT (affective disposition theory) and MDT (moral disengagement theory). ADT is generally regarded as the most comprehensive theory outlining the process of viewer enjoyment of fictional narratives. The theory suggests that viewers tend to like protagonists of any given entertainment narrative based on their previous exposure to story schemas and their moral judgement towards the protagonists. However, ADT generally bases its evidence on traditional 'good guy' hero narratives, where likability is linked to the moral actions of a protagonist, "Character liking cannot be capricious; it must be justified and defensible. If this were not so, we, as social creatures would experience cognitive dissonance and distress." (Shafer and Raney 2012, 1029). Three studies were conducted to prove the validity of ADT in relation with anti-hero narratives. The story schema claim held true in all three studies, proving that an affinity to a story

schema (even if it is an anti-hero story schema) results in more enjoyable because "It seems reasonable to assume then that anti-hero narratives, while varying in specifics, follow a general and consistent plot pattern." (1031)

With the second premise relating to morality vis-à-vis likability, however, things turned out to be a bit different. The results showed that immoral acts tend to increase rather than decrease enjoyment. The authors also noted that the enjoyability anti-hero narratives was the same even when moral disengagement cues were absent. These cues are instances in a narrative when the immoral act gets some sort of justification, be it due to casualty, circumstance, or character buildup. "The picture that seems to be emerging for anti-hero narratives is just the opposite: Moral judgment appears to play an insignificant role in anti-hero liking." (1037) MDT seems to prove that the question of morality can be put aside if there is enough justification for the immoral act. Moral disengagement also comes due to previous exposure to anti-hero narratives over time. Shafer and Raney used feature-length films (in two cases shortened) for their experiments. However, in the world of Serial TV, serial space takes over time as the main factor contributing to the form. Is it safe to assume that the dominance of anti-hero narratives in mainstream serial TV affects the viewer's moral engagement due to constant exposures to said narratives when enough time and space is given to justify the anti-hero's immorality? Or is it that the anti-hero as trickster has become more descriptive of the ordinary urbanized individual in postmodern culture?

V. Conclusion: The trickster's appeal

A major source of cultic energies in twentieth-century America was the entertainment industry: the Hollywood studio system, cohering just after World War One, projected its manufactured stars as simulacra of the pagan pantheon. -- Camille Paglia, 2019. *Provocations*

Cable TV and later SVOD platforms have seen the anti-hero narrative to be the most descriptive of their groundbreaking content. "The general increase in the level of sex and violence in network, cable, and streaming services enhances the addictive effect by tapping patterns of desire that are the unconscious equivalent of the more conscious narratively addictive tropes." (Broe 2019, 76)

Adam Kotsko's book *Why We Love Sociopaths* deals with the ontology of affective engagement with anti-heroes in late capitalist TV. The three chapters are divided into the three distinctive types of sociopaths he finds in contemporary TV shows; the schemers (eg. the character of *Seinfeld*), the climbers (eg. Donald Draper in *Mad Men*) and the enforcers (eg. Jack Bauer in *24*). The Schemers are protagonists who are either adults inhabiting child bodies (Cartman) or children in adult bodies (characters of *Seinfeld*). These sociopaths are characterized with a **dual nature** and an affinity to **play** constant **tricks**, **pranks**, and schemes and are commonly found in comedies. (Kotsko 2012, 42).

All three levels of sociopaths live by their own moral rules and disregard societal conventions with likeness to the descriptions earlier mentioned of the mythical trickster-figure. Kotsko defines the TV sociopath as "... an individual who transcends the social, who is not bound by in any gut-level way and *who can therefore use it* purely as a tool." (9) Kosto's rendition of the TV sociopath offers an insight into the shifting motifs in late capitalist TV. He asserts what Broe tends to repeat in *The Birth of the Binge*; that complex narratives have led to a hyperindustrial mode of engagement that is characteristic of the dissociated modes of behavior in postmodern society.

Essentially, the mythological trickster is an entertainer, so it is only natural that trickster-like characters have dominated the mass market of consumerist mythologies, i.e. contemporary serial television. Hynes, in the concluding chapter of *Mythical Trickster Figures* draws a list of functions of tricksters in mythologies as well as in real-life:

1. Trickster myths are deeply satisfying entertainment.
2. Trickster myths are ritual vents for social frustrations.
3. Tricksters reaffirm the belief system.
4. Tricksters are psychic explorers and adventurers.
5. Tricksters are agents of creativity who transcend the constrictions of monoculturality.
6. Tricksterish metaplay dissolves the order of things in the depth of the open-ended metaplay of life. (Hynes 1997, 202)

As media consumers, it is important that we are aware of how certain tropes such as indeterminacy and metanarratives infiltrate our everyday lives. Postmodernity has in fact allowed some of these metanarratives to become dominant ideologies that pass us by unnoticingly, but have a very stark effect on the way we experience life. This is a concept that Marxist theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have spoken about endlessly in their analysis of filmic and televised cultural texts. It is important to note that the political reading of said philosophers, as well as works of contemporary TV theorists such as Dennis Broe, touch on the foundations of an accelerated mode of production and consumption of media that seems to be leading the world into a more personalized but highly indeterminate future. Although I tried to distance this study from the political, it is my firm belief that the trickster (as well as the dominance of media narratives) are highly political. In an almost absurd manner, many satirical news outlets have been finding it increasingly difficult to satirize today's politics and (some) politicians. "Political humor is meant to chip away at the false sense of dignity attached to elected office, but Trump did that on his own" (Nelles, 2018). Nelles' *Real Life Magazine* article discusses how political practice has shed the mask of 'seriousness' and 'credibility' with the emergence of politician trickster-figures such as Donald Trump and his acolytes (to the dismay of political satire magazines such as *The Onion*).

Although trickster-figures can be highly engaging, fun, and closely relatable to our fluctuating mental

states, they are in my opinion representative of a totality of the human condition since they have existed for a very long time in different forms of laughter, play, and jokes. Comedy has always had the almost magical effect of changing the state of consciousness, which makes me see why many very recent shows often play with serious narratives in a comical form; here I am thinking of Netflix shows such as *The Chilling Adventurs of Sabrina* (2018-present)*, Sex Education* (2019-present)*, Stranger Things* (2016-present)*,* and *End of the Fu**ing World* (2017-2019). Incidentally, all of these shows' protagonists are teenagers doing 'adult' things. Could this be another indicator of the current indeterminacy but in genre? Mythological tricksters have existed all over the social, economic and political spectrums. Anansi the Spider was considered a symbol of resistance for African slaves shipped against their will to the new world, whereas the Nordic Loki's dubiousness and shapeshifting abilities render him more akin to a villain than a hero. All this to say that tricksters are tricky and indeterminate and their proper use in fiction can give way to very engaging and unpredictable story.

I am not sure if this research offers anything concrete, but I hope it leads to further analysis and readings of trickster-figures in popular cultural texts as well as in the real world under the lense of serial TV mythologies and consumerist psychology. I also hope that this research offers fellow media writers a new understanding of anti-heroes, what makes them so likeable and so effective, and how they can better create entertainingly dubious characters and the tricks that come along with them.

Notas finais

[1] Most of the theories on postmodernity can be found in Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 1991

[2] See Claude Lévi-Strauss *Myth and Meaning* 1978, pp. 5-11

[3] The essay "Plato's Pharmacy" can be found in *Dissemination* 1981

[4] See John Vervaeke, Christopher Mastropietro and Filip Miscevic in *Zombies in Western Culture: A Twenty-First Century Crisis* 2017, pp. 1-9

[5] For more on hauntology, see Mark Fisher *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures* 2014

[6] Propp, V. J., Liberman, A., Martin, A. Y., & Martin, R. P. (1997). *Theory and history of folklore* pp. 67-68. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[7] For more information on the 12 Archetypes, see Philippe L. De Coster *The Collective Unconscious and Its Archetypes* 2010

[8] Here York references Maslow's *Theory of Human Motivation* 1987, p. 69

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