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Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*(s): direct address and narrative control from stage to small screen

By Jessica Beaumont¹

Abstract

This essay explores the television comedy *Fleabag* (BBC 2016-2019) which was adapted from a theatrical monologue and owes its mode of direct address to this dramatic past. The original one-woman show, written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, was first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, and, like the BBC Three television adaptation that followed in 2016, follows the story of a sexually promiscuous young woman, known to the audience only as 'Fleabag,' struggling with the death of her closest friend. The essay is concerned with the application of auteur theory, which becomes relevant to a discussion of the use of direct address, and particularly interesting in the context of the perceived difficulty in resolving auteur theory and feminist content.

Keywords: *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, television comedy, BBC, auteur theory

Introduction

The television comedy *Fleabag* (BBC 2016-2019) is adapted from a theatrical monologue and owes its mode of direct address to this dramatic past. The original one-woman show, written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, was first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, and, like the BBC Three television adaptation that followed in 2016, follows the story of a sexually promiscuous young woman, known to the audience only as 'Fleabag,' struggling with the death of her closest friend. The second series of the television programme, which aired in 2019, develops *Fleabag*'s complex relationships with her family and introduces a love interest who is, rather inconveniently, a Catholic priest. Throughout the two six-episode series, the eponymous *Fleabag*, played by writer and producer Phoebe Waller-Bridge, speaks directly to her audience, casting sideways glances, and making snide comments or extended speeches, which give the audience a privileged insight into her character. These happen in intimate settings, such as on the toilet, during sex, or having nosebleed after being punched by her brother-in-law at a family dinner. The theatrical *Fleabag* appears within a context of other contemporary feminist monologues, such as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), and Michaela Coel's *Chewing Gum Dreams* (2015), the latter of which, like *Fleabag*, was adapted into a TV comedy employing direct address. However, over the course of twelve episodes, *Fleabag* draws attention to its narrative method to such an extent that it becomes one of the show's defining features. This self-conscious narrative style places the desires of the narrator-protagonist at odds with the desires of the writer, and as such demonstrates creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge's experimentation with the notion of authorship. As such, the application of auteur theory becomes relevant to a discussion of the use of direct address, and particularly interesting in the context of the perceived difficulty in resolving auteur

¹ Jessica Beaumont authored this essay as part of her undergraduate studies for the degree of BA English Literature at the University of Cambridge.

theory and feminist content. In a 2019 interview, Waller-Bridge speaks of the motivation behind the use of direct address in *Fleabag*:

The idea was to invite people in and make them feel like they're watching a stand-up-esque story, but make it feel like relentless jokes and that her whole reason for being there was to make you laugh. And you love her because she's making you laugh [...] And then at the very end, she asks you, 'What did you find funny about my horribly painful life?' That was going to be the twist and that relationship with the audience was extremely important.²

Waller-Bridge's emphasis on the relationship with the audience suggests both the relationship that a character making use of direct address has with the audience, and the relationship that the writer has with the audience. The use of direct address highlights these relationships because it makes them active, rather than passive; if the protagonist is consciously engaging with the audience, there is a suggestion of a reciprocal relationship in which the audience actively engages with the protagonist, and is as such participating in the diegesis. Faye Woods suggests that the use of direct address in the television adaptation is merely a remnant of the monologue format of the stage play, used 'to retain the affective, intimate pull [of] the theatre piece.'³ While this is the case, the use of direct address is also a method of narrative control. Acting in conjunction with the self-consciousness of the form, direct address is used to draw attention to the notion of authorship, thereby relating to ideas of a television auteur. Furthermore, the application of auteur theory to *Fleabag* situates the work within the process of television legitimation, as well as interrogating the theoretical framework of auteurism from a feminist perspective.

Fleabag's use of direct address is an attempt at narrative control:

Fleabag traps us solely in the perspective of its emotionally detached protagonist, where direct address is used to display her performance of femininity and attempts to control social situations.⁴

As the protagonist grapples with her self-assurance and self-control in a period of intense emotional distress, so too the cinematography and narration seem to grapple with control over what the audience is allowed to see. This can be seen in the third episode, in which *Fleabag* and her sister Claire go on an all-female silent retreat, and participate in a meditation class:

LEADER

Think of something you can't let go of in the past.

She frowns. The Leader mimes for *Fleabag* to close her eyes.

LEADER

² Tina Fey, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge Interviewed by Tina Fey', *GQ*, 10 July 2019.

³ Faye Woods, 'Too Close for Comfort: Direct Address and the Affective Pull of the Confessional Comic Woman in Chewing Gum and *Fleabag*', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 12.2 (2019), 194–212.

⁴ Woods.

A moment of noise. A moment of tension.

INT. FLASHBACK, FLEABAG'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

We see a woman's hands unbuckling a guy's trousers.

INT. MEDITATION ROOM – DAY

Fleabag opens her eyes. She is a bit shocked. She shakes the flashback off.

FLEABAG

(to camera)

Not for now.

Fleabag closes her eyes again.⁵

Woods would suggest that this 'traps'⁶ the audience in Fleabag's perspective, but it in fact demonstrates the conflict between the visual narrative, controlled by Waller-Bridge, and the verbal narrative, controlled by Fleabag. The visual narrative gives Fleabag intrusive thoughts, which are at odds with the idea of diegetic performance, which Fleabag is aware of and in control. Of course, Waller-Bridge has ultimate narrative control, but the impression of tension here makes clear the authorial presence that is not Fleabag's. Waller-Bridge thereby creates a tension between the impression of auteurist control and a character attempting to influence the narrative according to their own interests. Contextually, the audience is given insight into Fleabag's psyche, as this moment is characterised as 'something [she] can't let go of in the past,' but this is not a memory that Fleabag has chosen to make the audience privy to, unlike her overly candid narration of the death of her mother:

FLEABAG

(to camera)

Mum died three years ago. She had a double mastectomy but never really recovered. It was particularly hard because she had amazing boobs. She used to tell me I was lucky cos mine would never get in the way.⁷

Waller-Bridge's authorial control, however, makes the audience aware that Fleabag is keeping something hidden – her grief and guilt over inadvertently causing the death of her friend, Boo.

As the first series progresses, the audience gradually learns the details of how Boo died: Fleabag sleeps with her friend's boyfriend, causing Boo, grief-stricken, to step in front of a bicycle in an attempt to cause a minor injury and inspiring guilt and sympathy in the cheating boyfriend. However, Boo and several others are killed in the severe car accident that follows. At the conclusion of the sixth episode, Fleabag's sister Claire uses this as an explanation as to why she does not believe her when Fleabag accuses Claire's husband, Martin, of attempting to kiss her:

⁵ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 'Series Two: Episode 4', in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019).

⁶ Woods.

⁷ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 'Series One: Episode 3', in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019).

‘After what you did to Boo.’⁸ In both television programme and play, this is the moment Fleabag loses control – this is not what she wanted her audience to see, and her performance has fallen apart. Isobel Waller-Bridge’s score kicks in here to devastating effect – the soundtrack is overwhelming and atonal, with strong connections to the style of soundtrack used in horror movies. Through a series of rapid cuts, the audience alternately see Fleabag looking desperately at them, flashbacks of the events leading to Boo’s death, and Fleabag staring, distraught, at her sister and Martin. The audience is placed in the same position as Claire and Martin, silently judging her, because with the realisation that Fleabag has kept secrets from the audience, the conspiratorial rapport between audience and narrator falls apart. Eventually she begins to retreat from the camera’s perspective, but the camera follows her relentlessly until Fleabag is trapped against a wire gate, somewhere in the depths of the Tate Modern:

Fleabag walks down a corridor. The camera follows her from behind. [...] The camera is coming right up close to Fleabag’s face. [...] The camera is close on Fleabag’s face. [...] Fleabag is slumped on the floor.⁹

Shots of Fleabag are interspersed with continual flashback shots, familiar to the audience because they have appeared throughout the first series in moments of emotional vulnerability. For the remainder of this episode, Fleabag avoids eye contact with the camera, as if she has forgotten her audience, or is obstinately refusing to acknowledge its existence. There is a comparable moment in the play, although it involves dialogue: ‘FLEABAG (*to audience*). That wasn’t my fault. He wanted me... he.... wanted me so...’¹⁰ Here, Waller-Bridge attempts to convey the way in which words fail but is forced by the self-imposed constraints of the theatrical medium to give Fleabag halting dialogue. In a one woman show, if Fleabag doesn’t describe her past actions to the audience, it is impossible for the audience to fully comprehend the narrative. However, the printed edition of the play text does follow this dialogue with a large section of blank page, perhaps to indicate that the actor should remain silent for a period of time, or simply to convey on paper the failure of words. In contrast, the television programme can employ visuals to convey this crucial plot point, through the use of flashbacks. Furthermore, in the play, she does go on to speak to the audience after this moment, in a final scene in which she narrates mercy-killing Boo’s beloved pet guinea-pig, Hillary, who has been previously injured by one of Fleabag’s casual lovers:

I’m crying. My fingers are gripping her. I can’t – I imagine my – I can’t - I can feel how scared she is. How much pain she’s in – My fingers are – I can’t – I hold her to me tightly and – I hold her to me tighter... I hold her to me tighter, until I feel her bones crack against me and her chattering stop.

Everything is quiet and she is safe.¹¹

A profoundly different effect is created in TV show and play, not only because Hillary is not killed on television. Instead, the TV show presents a close-up shot of Fleabag, tear-streaked, sitting in the café and cradling the guinea-pig, maintaining the jarring distance from the audience by not

⁸ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, ‘Series One: Episode 6’, in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019).

⁹ Waller-Bridge, ‘Series One: Episode 6’.

¹⁰ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* (Nick Hern Books, 2013).

¹¹ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*.

making eye contact with the camera. Comparatively, the play, which is not staged with props or an actual guinea-pig, requires the actor to describe what she is doing. As such, the avoidance of direct address is positioned by the adaptive process as comparably emotionally affecting as the death of the guinea-pig. Waller-Bridge chooses to deprive the audience of the expected narrative technique, which has been so continually reinforced throughout the first series, intending to upset and unsettle, and to ultimately demonstrate the significance of narrative decisions in the affective quality of a television programme.

The narrative devices that define *Fleabag* are the result of the progression towards complex narrative television that contributes to the so-called legitimisation of television. A discourse of 'legitimation' of any cultural medium should be considered in the context of the social grounds behind cultural capital, according to the theories of Pierre Bourdieu: the cultural capital of a medium is based upon the social demographics that consume it.¹² A 'taste culture' is based on institutionalised cultural capital, despite the trend of increasing complexity of serial narratives as presented in TV by distributors such as HBO and Netflix. Indeed, that complexity is considered more legitimate than simplicity is the product of specific social situations. Television's situation as a lower cultural medium is largely the result of its historical association with the domestic, therefore feminine, and working class. However, the translation of *Fleabag* from stage to screen enacts a level of democratisation in that it allows a greater number of people, from different social backgrounds, to consume it as media. It is therefore interesting that the visualisation of the narrative on screen should situate *Fleabag* so firmly as upper middle class: this is conveyed by the settings in expensive residential areas and high-end bars and restaurants around London. The television adaptation of *Fleabag* also participates in the trend towards complexity and, by extension, legitimisation. In his 2015 book *Complex TV*, Jason Mittell claims that since the mid-1990s television has become increasingly 'cinematic' and 'literary,'¹³ in respect of narrative method, character development, camera technique and other aspects. The monologue format of the *Fleabag* stage play establishes a mode of direct address which, in the television adaptation, is well suited to the playful modes of audience address seen in twenty-first-century television, but it also, crucially, draws the television adaptation towards the theatrical mode.

Fleabag is not unique in adopting these techniques. *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013-2018) uses direct address to great effect in conjunction with a morally dubious narrator-protagonist, while British comedy shows a great deal of precedent for experimentation with methods of address and narrative technique. Shows as different as *Miranda* (BBC 2009-2015), *Peep Show* (Channel 4 2003-2015), c *Chewing Gum* (Channel 4 2015-2017) all make use of direct address, point-of-view camera angles, and combinations of the two, to comic effect. This is evidence of the way in which 'the play with modes of audience address seems to have become a signature feature of successful twenty-first-century series,'¹⁴ as described by Dorothee Birke and Robyn Warhol. Experimentation with narrative is both symptomatic of and contributes to the legitimisation of television in that it creates further points of comparison with legitimated mediums, such as literature, theatre, and cinema. When Waller-Bridge makes self-conscious use of direct address as

¹² Erik Neveu, 'Bourdieu's Capital(S)', in *The Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. by Thomas Medvetz and Jeffrey J. Sallaz (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1–30.

¹³ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*.

¹⁴ Dorothee Birke and Robyn Warhol, 'Multimodal You: Playing with Direct Address in Contemporary Narrative Television', in *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*, ed. by Jan Alber and Greta Olson (De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 141–56.

a narrative device, the show exemplifies the way television relates itself to the theatrical – it is more literary than cinematic and more cinematic than literary:

Television uses direct address in a more theatrical way than cinema: staged drama and television genres like newscasting or commercial advertising present themselves as directed to an audience, while in cinema the direct address to the camera is avoided or experienced as transgressive.¹⁵

Television is already a theatrical medium, and as such explains why television would be an appropriate vehicle for an adaptation of Waller-Bridge's original theatrical monologue.

In the one-woman play, the eponymous Fleabag shifts between dialogue, either spoken by the actor playing Fleabag, or pre-recorded audio, and direct-to-audience monologue. The play text decrees no other actors on the stage; a note reads 'Other characters can be recorded voices, played by other actors or played by Fleabag.' Even in the 2019 National Theatre production, which was streamed across the world as a major event, the staging mimicked that of a small Fringe venue; Waller-Bridge performed mostly sitting on a wooden chair atop a small pedestal, under a spotlight. In these monologues, direct address is used to establish an intimate relationship between Fleabag and her audience:

FLEABAG turns to the audience.

Three nights ago, I ordered myself a very slutty pizza.

I mean, the bitch was dripping.

That dirty little stuffed crust wanted to be in me so bad, I just ate the little tart like she meant nothing to me, and she loved it.

[...]

Then that finished. So, I lay there. Thinking. Café. Numbers. Numbers. Zac. Numbers.

Googled Obama to keep up with – y'know. Who, as it turns out, is also – attractive?

Lay there. Numbers, numbers, Obama, numbers, Zac, Obama, numbers, Zac –

Suddenly I was on YouPorn having a horrible wank.

[...]

Now that really knocked me out, so I put my computer away, leaned over, kissed my boyfriend Harry goodnight and went to sleep.¹⁶

¹⁵ Birke and Warhol.

¹⁶ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*.

This is the first moment of direct address in the play, and firmly establishes that the asides to the audience will be dirty, intimate, unabashedly sexual, but that they will also give the audience immediate insight into Fleabag's character. This moment can be characterised as demonstrating 'an empathetic mode of identification' which leads to first 'recognition' and then 'action'¹⁷ – in this context the intimacy established between protagonist and audience is subversive. She is posh, uses self-consciously antiquated language like 'little tart,' and deliberately shocks through the use of absurdist descriptions and swear words. The rapidly shifting registers create an immediately comic atmosphere, and this comic connection establishes a rapport between character and audience. Contact with the audience is enhanced through the even casual use of the second person 'y'know'. The address establishes Fleabag's awareness that she has an audience, and that she is deliberately performing to that audience. To an extent, the direct connection between character and audience signifies the way in which *Fleabag* will diverge from a traditional theatrical monologue, in which the audience does not have a diegetic role in the narrative but observes from a wholly external vantage point.

To further establish the impression of conscious performativity, Fleabag confirms to the established comic type of the 'unruly woman,' a bawdy and material archetype of femininity whose sexuality 'is neither evil and controllable like that of the femme fatale, nor sanctified and denied like that of the virgin/Madonna.'¹⁸ The incongruity between the objectification of former US President Barack Obama and Disney Channel actor Zac Efron, firmly establishes Fleabag as a woman with sexual appetite, but whose desire is, in this moment, characterised as comical. The description of the pizza as 'slutty' draws attention to the absurdity of the adjective itself and therefore re-appropriates derogatory language from a feminist perspective. This connection between food and sex draws on the carnivalesque and associated abjection aesthetics – Fleabag as unruly woman seeks relatability through emphasis on the bodily. Furthermore, the establishment of the carnivalesque mode signposts *Fleabag*'s interest in the audience/performer relationship, as Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

Carnival [...] does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators
[...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone
participates because its very idea embraces all the people.¹⁹

Fleabag engages with the carnivalesque in her frank attitude towards sex and food; this 'relatability' connects the audience, letting them know that, like the carnival, they participate in Fleabag's appetites. Fleabag's sexuality is at the forefront of her attention, and therefore the audience's: 'I'm not obsessed with sex. (beat) I just can't stop thinking about it.'²⁰ This foregrounding again relates to Fleabag's self-conscious performativity – she brings the typically taboo topic of female libido to the forefront to give a false impression of intimacy, while in fact withholding emotional vulnerability. Indeed, Fleabag talks more readily about anal sex in the first series than she does her grief having lost her mother and best friend.

Furthermore, Waller-Bridge's style resists her content, because of the way that *Fleabag* combines the low comic features of the carnivalesque and bodily grotesque, and the high stylistic

¹⁷ Patrice Petro, 'Mass Culture and the Feminine: The "Place" of Television in Film Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 25.3 (1986), 5–21.

¹⁸ Kathleen Rowe, 'Introduction: Feminist Film Theory and the Question of Laughter', in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 1–22.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, ed. by Hélène Iswolsky (transl.) (Indiana University Press, 1984).

²⁰ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 'Series One: Episode 2', in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019), pp. 35–65.

features, which draw the television form towards legitimated mediums, i.e. theatre and literature. Waller-Bridge therefore presents a tension between form, content, and style – this is exactly what Andrew Sarris would characterise as the behaviour of an auteur. However, *Fleabag* also presents the tension within auteur theory itself, when TV does not *have* auteurs in the film theory sense. The disjoint between subject matter and auteurist style also raises a difficulty, in that the discussion of feminism struggles in juxtaposition with a theoretical framework that is so fundamentally patriarchal.

It also notable that there is a shift away from the ‘slutty pizza’ and wank over Zac Efron in the television adaptation. Her first direct address here is rather less bawdy and draws her character more towards the ideas of the femme fatale:

FLEABAG

(earnest, a touch of pain. To camera)

You know that feeling when a guy you like sends you a text at 2 o’clock on a Tuesday night and asks if he can ‘come and find you’ and you’ve accidentally made it out like you’ve just got in yourself, so you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything, dig out some Agent Provocateur business, suspender belt, the whole bit, and wait by the door until the buzzer goes

–²¹

Here she is less centred on her own pleasure, whether that be literal self-pleasure or satisfaction gained from food, and more on the way she presents to a man. Furthermore, the fact that Waller-Bridge herself plays the Fleabag character demonstrates a self-reflexive critique of the female body as object. As such the Agent Provocateur scene should be interpreted as a visualisation of the show’s concern with self-conscious performativity through direct address, which would not be possible in a black box staging.

Direct address troubles Waller-Bridge’s position as both an auteur, and, more specifically, a feminist auteur. Auteur theory plays a crucial role in the legitimisation of film, Colin MacCabe articulates in his summary of its theorisation in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, saying:

[Cahiers du Cinema] insisted on the relevance of themes of great art to a form whose address to the audience neglected all qualifications of education, class, and nationality which the various national cultures of Europe had been so concerned to stress.²²

This statement emphasises the democratising element of film legitimation, and by extension the important feminist act that takes place when auteur theory is applied to television, historically disregarded as a feminine medium. Of course, auteur theory has been questioned and deconstructed extensively by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Pauline Kael amongst others. The very notion of authorship is seen by Barthes and Foucault as problematic in relation to authorial intent

²¹ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, ‘Series One: Episode 1’, in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019), pp. 7–32.

²² Colin MacCabe, ‘The Revenge of the Author’, in *Film and Authorship*, ed. by Virginia Wright Wexman (Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 30–41.

in opposition to audience/reader reception. A film production has multiple sources of creative input and is less typically associated with a single individual than a novel or play. To an extent, auteur theory in film is a legitimating process that is incongruous with literary criticism of the same period; auteurism is a convenient vehicle for marketing individual film productions. As such, auteur theory should be approached with a degree of scepticism, especially in its relation to feminism. Despite this, it does provide an interesting and valuable framework for the discussion of Waller-Bridge's use of direct address, because of the extent of Waller-Bridge's creative influence over the production of *Fleabag*, and the way in which the show comments on the relationship between a protagonist who is narratively controlling, and a writer who has ultimate control. This is especially interesting when the protagonist is played by the writer, causing further overlap between the two roles.

Much of the early theorisation of the auteur, particularly when first transferred from French cinema to Hollywood in the 1960s, evidently does not apply to Waller-Bridge or *Fleabag*. Sarris' conception of the auteur applies solely to the director, and requires 'technical competence,' 'distinguishable personality,' and 'interior meaning [...] extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material.'²³ In other words, auteurism is dependent on a director asserting his personality that is somehow incongruous with his artistic vision. This is obviously totally incompatible with the idea of a writer-auteur. Indeed, Sarris's ideas are wholly deconstructed by Kael in her responding essay *Circles and Squares*, which is thoroughly disparaging of auteur theory altogether. Kael writes:

Their ideal auteur is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that's handed to him, and expresses himself by shoving bits of style up the crevasses of the plots. If his 'style' is in conflict with the storyline or subject matter, so much the better – more chance for tension.²⁴

Furthermore, if auteur theory relies on a large oeuvre, and a defined style that is in tension with the material, it cannot be applied to Waller-Bridge, considering *Fleabag* is a debut theatrical work, and only the second of her television writing credits. Waller-Bridge's material is also specifically intended as the vehicle for her stylistic choices. Of course, Waller-Bridge is not the director, but rather a writer, actor, and producer. Thus, it is clear that in applying auteur theory to television broadly, and *Fleabag* specifically, considerable alterations to the theory would be required, and as such these early conceptions of auteurism relate somewhat tangentially to *Fleabag*. Significantly, however, Sarris and Kael demonstrate the conflation of the auteur with patriarch – both writers default to masculine pronouns in their essays, while Kael even uses a clearly gendered metaphor to describe the director when she says that he 'shoves bits of style up the crevasses of plots.'²⁵ This metaphor turns auteurism into an almost sexual act and makes clear that the idea of the auteur is a profoundly gendered one.

Auteur theory can, however, be applied to television, albeit somewhat altered. In their book *Legitimizing Television*, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine describe an auteur as the 'artist of

²³ Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962', in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 40–46.

²⁴ Pauline Kael, 'Circles and Squares (Excerpt)', in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 46–54.

²⁵ Kael.

unique vision’ or the ‘singular author-creator whose work is seen as a form of expression.’²⁶ Adopting this looser conception of the auteur, it is possible to apply it to television. Newman and Levine suggest that, rhetorically, the idea of the auteur can be applied to the television role of the writer-producer. This is on one level due to the fact that television directors do not have consistent artistic control over an entire serial, but often work on an episode-by-episode basis. A television auteur differs from a cinema auteur in that their oeuvre can consist of a single television series because of the fact that a television series is a serial project, whose internal consistencies of style and theme are comparable with the consistencies between wholly different works across a film director’s career. Furthermore, the idea of writer- as-auteur is most applicable to British television, as in American television (and to an extent, Hollywood cinema) television scripts are often the result of the collaborative endeavours of a writers’ room, whereas in British television a single writer is more common. The figure of the writer-producer can therefore be described as the ‘showrunner,’ a term which, in its attribution of overall creative authority to a single person, is comparable to the idea of the auteur. The showrunner does also have a managerial role; as such they can appropriately be billed as the ‘creator’ of the show, as in the case of Phoebe Waller-Bridge and *Fleabag*. Therefore, as the author of the original playscript, and the dominating creative authority of the television programme, responsible for the teleplay, Waller-Bridge can be described as a female auteur – this is especially clear in how experimentation with narrative becomes such a large part of the style of the show.

The way in which *Fleabag* draws attention to the art of narration, as demonstrated in these scenes from the first series, shows Waller-Bridge’s interest in authorial control. It is clear that the use of direct address by *Fleabag* exemplifies how:

Direct address in the dramatic mode [of television] 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’ [...] life.²⁷

Fleabag cannot be mimetic when its protagonist is so consciously performing to an audience she is aware of, as demonstrated by the direct address. Furthermore, the impression of ‘relatability’ created by direct address only furthers the contradiction between the show’s anti- mimetic and realist qualities. Inggoo Kang’s *Hollywood Reporter* article on the rise of the female comedy auteur concludes that:

In too many myopically male products, women are reduced to trophies. The complications – and comedy – in women’s foibles and desires that female auteurs bring to the screen are long overdue.²⁸

Although Kang’s conclusions are aimed at a popular, not academic, audience, and therefore make great generalisations about ‘male products’ and the ‘female auteur,’ her statement does draw attention to how feminist auteurism and comedy overlap. In *The Unruly Woman*, Kathleen Rowe states that ‘the transgressive woman finds her [most sympathetic home] in the “lower” forms of

²⁶ Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Routledge, 2012).

²⁷ Birke and Warhol.

²⁸ Inggoo Kang, ‘Emmys: Inside the Rise of the Female TV Auteur’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 2018.

comedy, especially romantic comedy.’²⁹ Rowe’s conclusion would suggest that comedy is the appropriate genre for the transgressive woman, while Kang’s makes the assumption that the very fact of writing comedy is a transgressive act in a male-dominated field. Assuming that television is a feminine medium, the television comedy, especially one that focuses as *Fleabag* does on sex and romance, is particularly feminine. By extension, the way in which direct address contributes to Waller-Bridge’s conception as an auteur demonstrates an interest in the legitimating process from a feminist perspective.

The second series of *Fleabag* develops the self-consciousness of the narrative form, by making the use of direct address more demonstrably diegetic. The character of the Priest, with whom Fleabag falls in love over the course of the series, gradually becomes aware of Fleabag’s asides. This makes clear that the direct address is a real-time interruption to the events on screen and raises the question as to why some characters are able to perceive the disruption and others are not. Crucially, this positions the audience as ‘real’ in relation to the diegesis, increasing the metafictional quality of the show. The conclusion of the third episode has the Priest notice her breaking of the fourth wall, questioning where she has ‘gone’. This comes at a moment of intimacy between the two characters, as they discuss their mutual attraction and the idea of love:

PRIEST

Where did... where did you just go?

FLEABAG

What?

PRIEST

You just went somewhere.

Fleabag looks at the camera in panic.

PRIEST

There. There. Where did you just go?³⁰

The way that the Priest interacts with Fleabag’s direct address serves to illustrate the emotional connection between the two characters, but if his awareness of the fourth wall is a result of emotional intimacy, it is curious that no other character should perceive it – what about Fleabag’s sister Claire, her therapist, or her Dad, the latter of whom is shown to understand more about Fleabag’s character than any other? The Priest’s awareness of Fleabag’s direct address therefore suggests a primacy of the romantic connection, and a self-conscious adherence to the conventions of the romance genre – the second series was promoted with the tag line: ‘This is a love story.’ Furthermore, it acts as a signpost to Waller-Bridge’s deliberate disruptions of theatrical and televisual conventions. Asides are not supposed to be part of the diegesis, and are fundamentally anti-mimetic, only accepted by the audience because of their conventional status. To integrate them in this way unsettles Fleabag – she ‘looks to the camera in panic’ – and unsettles the audience too, who, in suddenly being attributed a role in the narrative, are unsure of what that role entails. Here, therefore, Waller-Bridge asserts her authorial control over Fleabag’s attempt at narrative control.

²⁹ Rowe.

³⁰ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, ‘Series Two: Episode 3’, in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019).

A similar moment takes place in the following episode, when the Priest and Fleabag are in her café:

PRIEST

Tell me what's going on underneath there!

FLEABAG

Nothing!

PRIEST

Tell me! Come on, you can tell me.

FLEABAG

(to Priest)

No!

(to camera)

Nothing!

He immediately looks where she is looking, right down the barrel at us.

PRIEST

Ah! What are you doing!

FLEABAG

Stop being so churchy!

PRIEST

I'm not being churchy, I'm just trying to get to know you.

FLEABAG

Well I don't want that. A long silence.³¹

This moment demonstrates the Priest's intrusion into Fleabag's psyche, visualised by his intrusion into the storytelling method. The direction here, 'right down the barrel' at us, is reminiscent of a gun, as well as the camera to which it refers. The Priest not only looks at the camera, but he does so in a way that approaches breaking the fourth wall himself, making the audience unsure if he has seen them in the same way Fleabag does. Marc Vernet describes this look at the camera as having two effects:

³¹ Waller-Bridge, 'Series Two: Episode 4'.

It foregrounds the enunciative instance of the filmic text and attacks the spectator's voyeurism by putting the space of the film and the space of the movie theatre briefly into direct contact.³²

This is perhaps even more shocking when the media is not being consumed in a movie theatre, but one's own home. Vernet confirms the violence of the look at the camera in his choice of the word, 'attacks' – the subversion of cinematic or televisual form is intended to shock and unsettle, in this case to shock the audience into laughter. Direct address in television is arguably already intrusive, and for it to happen in a way that the audience does not expect, having had a precedent established, is even more so. The Priest effectively integrates the audience into the diegesis by forcibly casting them as voyeur.

This scene can also be seen as the culmination of Fleabag's increasing loss of control of the narrative concerning her relationship with the Priest that takes place throughout the fourth episode of the second series. The episode began with Fleabag confusing the delivery of her lines to the camera and the Priest:

FLEABAG

(to camera)

His neck.

PRIEST

And you never felt them... go somewhere?

FLEABAG

(accidentally to camera)

No, they were already gone.

(accidentally to Priest)

His beautiful neck.

Beat.

PRIEST

What?

Fleabag, panicked look to camera.

FLEABAG

³² Marc Vernet, 'Look at the Camera', *Cinema Journal*, 28.2 (1989), 48–63.

What?

PRIEST

You just said, ‘his beautiful neck’.³³

Waller-Bridge places the audience in an uncomfortable position as voyeur by making us complicit with Fleabag’s sexual objectification of the Priest, capitalising on the taboo of treating the Catholic Priest as an object of sexual desire. The comedy here arises from Fleabag being caught, and because of the audience’s role as her confidant there is a degree to which the audience has been caught as well. Furthermore, the ‘panicked look’ that she gives the camera draws us into complicity as she looks to us for help. It is a poignant subversion of her desperate look to the camera at the conclusion of the first series. The expectation that the audience is somehow part of the diegesis, a blatant fallacy, foregrounds her look in this moment. This instance of slippage is comedic because it is the result of Fleabag’s narratorial mistake, not an invasion of the narrative method by Priest or camera, but it is no less demonstrative of the fragility of the device when narration is combined with diegesis.

Fleabag’s relationship with the Priest also causes her to look away from the camera as she does at the conclusion of series one when she tries to escape the judgement of her sister and Martin. However, her desire to hide from the camera takes on a very different role in relating to the Priest. The first instance is when they have sex in the penultimate episode. Her desire to hide from the camera is significant because of the explicitness of the series so far, and how her sexual appetite has previously continually cast her as the stereotype of the unruly woman. When she has sex with the Priest, however, she pushes the camera away, wanting privacy:

INT. FLEABAG’S FLAT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

Fleabag and the Priest are in bed. He is on top of her, it’s passionate. She looks to the camera, then pushes it forcefully away.³⁴

The rejection of the camera in this moment is arguably a rejection of the unruly stereotype. Previously her excessive candour regarding her sexual appetite has functioned as a coping mechanism, but she has no desire to distance herself emotionally from the Priest, and as such does not feel the need to be so overly demonstrative in her sexual behaviour. The finale of the second series even more strongly echoes the finale of series one, in that Fleabag non-verbally asks the camera to leave her alone and moves away:

The camera moves with her for a couple of steps.

She stops, feeling it follow her. She looks at us. She smiles slightly with an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

She’s asking us not to follow her.

She turns and walks again up the street.

³³ Waller-Bridge, ‘Series Two: Episode 4’.

³⁴ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, ‘Series Two: Episode 5’, in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019).

The camera remains where it is.

When she gets almost out of sight she turns and gives us a smile and a little wave.

Then turns and walks off into the night.

Goodbye.³⁵

Unlike in the first series however, this time the camera adheres to her request, and she successfully leaves the audience behind.

The female auteur is a complex figure, not in the least because some theorists have suggested that auteur theory is incompatible with a feminist approach. Karen Hollinger has pointed to the collaborative nature of film production, as well as the reluctance certain female directors have shown to being described as ‘feminist’, as difficulties in resolving auteur theory and feminism.³⁶ The designation of the director as the ‘auteur’ is seen by some as increasingly arbitrary, and this is only furthered in the case of *Fleabag*, in which the development of the piece goes from one-woman monologue to ensemble television comedy. As such, *Fleabag* comments on this difficulty in its artistic format – just as Fleabag ‘sometimes [worries she] wouldn’t be such a feminist if [she] had bigger tits,’³⁷ the show itself seems to worry that it cannot be feminist and the work of a single auteur. It is the show’s use of direct address that raises these questions, because direct address questions the notion of authorship and authorial control.

³⁵ Phoebe Waller-Bridge, ‘Series Two: Episode 6’, in *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (Sceptre, 2019).

³⁶ Karen Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies* (Routledge, 2012).

³⁷ Waller-Bridge, ‘Series Two: Episode 4’.

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Bio

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