

# Theatre and Film Intertwined

## Transgression and Intermediality in *Fleabag*

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In the distinctly contemporary story of writer-producer-actress Phoebe Waller-Bridge's monodrama *Fleabag* (National Theatre Live, 2019), an anonymous 21<sup>st</sup>-century heroine struggles with existential angst, grief, sexuality, and loneliness in today's London. The artistic element that elevates this narrative from a sea of similar stories is the stark remark of self-reflexivity.

The monodrama is an heir to postmodern theatre and, as such, is inherently post-Brechtian in that several new techniques had been designed in order to reach beyond the field of conventional bourgeois theatrical tradition and to distance the audience from the possibility of emotional involvement (Fischer-Lichte 281). The attempts of disillusionment and alienation of spectators by V-effect and enhanced self-reflexivity are the heritage of modernist Brechtian theatre. In the contemporary tradition, the assets of modernism are already incorporated in the aesthetics of theatre, as well as the adaptation of syntactical elements of film, constituting the essence of today's theatrical *mise-en-scène* (Finter 46). While theatre is necessarily stylized and abstract to a certain level, film is traditionally perceived as the "imprint of reality." In order to challenge the ontological cohesion between symbol and referent in filmic perception, the *Fleabag* television series (Two Brothers Pictures, 2016-2019)

borrowes the device of *aside* from classical theatre, creating an increased quality of self-reflexivity. The following comparison and analysis of different representational strategies and self-reflexive techniques of both the theatrical and television series versions of *Fleabag* highlight similarities and, even more importantly, differences that designate the viewer's position in remarkably different ways, either as the recipient of the *parabasis* or as a participator in the diegesis.

Live theatre, consisting of performative acts in an empirical space, is inherently interpersonal and ephemeral in nature. The monodrama genre is particularly suitable for absolutizing the main character's inner world by constructing a definitive narrative identity, since the entire structure of the play functions as an extended monologue, speaking directly to the audience in the absence of other characters. The opening scene displays a minimalistic setting with Waller-Bridge as Fleabag, the narrator and protagonist of the play, sitting on a chair in the middle of an empty black space without detailed set design or props. A closer examination reveals that the visually minimalist structure of staging is based on the intense use of external sound and Waller-Bridge's frequently changing viewing directions. The *mise-en-scène* signifies the presence of two physically absent characters



**Fig. 1** | Imitation of cinematographic framing and viewing directions based on the face of the actress, who marks the position of the other character on stage left in *Fleabag*, 00:00:24. National Theatre Live, 2019.



**Fig. 2** | The sudden change of framing with the overhead lighting and the shifting position encourages us to perceive the actress's whole posture, and the other character in the new scene is positioned directly in front of her in *Fleabag*, 00:00:26. National Theatre Live, 2019.



**Fig. 3** | The scene functioning as a narrative frame for the inner monologue ends with Waller-Bridge covering her gaze in *Fleabag*, 00:02:36. National Theatre Live, 2019.



**Fig. 4** | Immediately afterwards, the first direct eye contact takes place, indicating the change in the tone of voice in *Fleabag*, 00:02:43. National Theatre Live, 2019.

(a secretary and a company manager) with recorded dialogue fragments and the actress's constantly maintained eye-contact in given directions. The frame scene of the play (also the only one featuring other characters in sound) is easy to read in the way we have become accustomed to in the perception of filmic texts, where the viewer does not always see all the characters but can usually place them in the diegetic space without further ado. The abrupt change of lighting and the actress's posture on the chair, along with her viewing direction, creates the illusion of a hard cut, switching the imitated framing of the view from a close-up (Fig. 1) to a full shot (Fig. 2).

The opening scene features multiple filmic elements offering a possible reading method by emphasizing the intermedial codes of the performance. Therefore, the film-like *mise-en-scène* comes before the first gesture of direct transgression: at the ending of the frame scene, Waller-Bridge covers her face for a moment (Fig. 3), lightning changes, and only then does she look out directly at the audience (Fig. 4).

That is the distinctive moment when the real internal monologue in a first-person narrative begins (00:02:36). From this point onwards, she quickly switches from past tense to present and begins to provide lengthy, subjective descriptions and

explanatory commentary on the self-interpreted story. There is an important change in the signification of other characters as well: Waller-Bridge herself voices everyone else, often utilizing the visual dichotomy of POV shots and reverse POV shots (00:12:25). These intermedial elements contribute to an even greater immersive and ephemeral presence in every level of the narrative, where the ego filters the outside world through itself and directly reveals the contents of its own consciousness. Thus the play paradoxically reaches the ontological essence of the self-absolutizing monodrama genre by adapting traditional cinematographic techniques.

Although the play in itself was a groundbreaking contemporary work, the new version made for television (coming after and due to the enormous success of the theatrical performance) was not a mere transposition of the script. Narrative film is an immersive medium with a typically illusionistic style and concealed formal devices. Cinematic storytelling asserts naturalistic representation in terms of camera angles, editing, pacing, and acting, offering traditional modes of interpretation in relation with the ontological realism of the filmic image. The dominant narrative techniques also present an objective, omnipotent narrative point of view, while offering the viewer the position of *voyeur*.



**Fig. 5** | A subjective shot as the opening moment of the TV series *Fleabag*, 00:00:03. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.



**Fig. 6** | Confirmatory objective shot recorded from side position in *Fleabag*, 00:00:07. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.



**Fig. 7** | The first act of transgression in *Fleabag*, 00:00:16. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

In the television series *Fleabag* this fundamental aspect of traditional cinematic storytelling is negated by the ancient device of the theatrical *aside*. By having the protagonist look into the camera, the work forms its own audience, portrayed as a presence, and exposes the artificiality of the film's diegetic reality. However, instead of working to strengthen disillusionment, this effect aims to highlight the presence of the spectator inscribed in the filmic text.

In the opening scene of the series' first episode (00:00:03), we are confronted with a subjective shot (Fig. 5), formally indicated by a shaky handheld camera footage and the confirmatory, lateral close-up showing the actor to whom the subjective image belongs (Fig. 6). The conspicuous absence of an objective establishing shot promptly embodies the subjective manner of the storytelling. This disposition is compounded by the fact that Waller-Bridge immediately looks aside and into the camera, directly addressing the viewer without changing camera angle or inserting a filler shot during editing (Fig. 7).

The typical element of *aside* consists of two versions throughout the series. The first one is similar to the one developed in the ancient Greek theatre. The traditional gesture of *parabasis* is comprehended as a virtual exit from the diegetic space, usually by the actor stepping to the edge of the stage with a specific gesture and tone of voice, signifying the very act of transgression (Hubbard 1). When the unnamed heroine turns her head away from the ongoing scene she is taking part in, or even repositions her entire posture (00:09:51) without any other characters noticing the change (at least in the original first season), the gesture of *aside* is often accompanied by spectacular effects of changing the depth of field (00:21:40) or an unusual camera angle. With this transgressive element, cinematic representation turns to the devices of theatre in order to create a new, external "layer" of diegesis, one shared with the spectator, while making motion picture similar to the ephemeral nature and liveliness of a theatrical performance. The inherent intermedial quality of the series is easily recognizable in this spectacular gesture of *parabasis*, which is often associated with tropes of irony (de Man 179). The significant distancing effect of irony serves as the main tone of voice employed in the series by the protagonist, especially in her acidic remarks addressing the audience. The *mise-en-scène*, however, repeatedly performs another variety of the infamous *aside*, when the actress, with the slightest averting of her gaze (Fig. 8), looks directly into the camera in the very same shot without editing or any shift in the camera angle (Fig. 9). Thus, it creates the feeling of the most intimate connection with the viewer, as if they were integrated as equally essential participants of the scene. This technique of self-reflexivity is so delicate and barely perceptible that it is hardly viable without the immersive cinematic depiction of diegesis, which is considered one of the most effective and fundamental devices of filmic representation. Although during the reception of a film only a limited amount of space is visible to the viewer, the mechanisms of editing allow us to comprehend the diegetic space as a whole, consistent universe, where the characters live and breathe, viewers only secretly witnessing the action. *Mise-en-scène* elements build on that effect when the angle of the camera and the main character's point of view are arranged side by side (00:01:24), or completely congruent (00:01:25). Looking into the camera with such a tiny correction involves the viewer in the space of the scene, creating the illusion of being right in the middle of the action.

Under the aegis of intermediality, by the incorporation of cinematic *mise-en-scène* in a theatrical performance, as well as through the extensive use of the ephemeral theatrical devices in the television show, *Fleabag* strives toward a new tradition of self-reflexivity, that is both a phenomenon and an indicator of the *Zeitgeist*. In contrast to the Brechtian theatre, however, *Fleabag*'s self-reflexive quality seeks the possibilities of participation. Instead of alienation and disillusionment, *Fleabag*, the embodiment of the lonely hero of our time, aims to create a collective experience and a sense of community, and, most importantly, to arouse compassion through cruel irony and sarcastic commentary in a fragmented and polyphonic era. ■



Fig. 8 | Narratively objective shot at the beginning of the scene in *Fleabag*, 00:01:24. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.



Fig. 9 | Exposing narrative subjectivity by looking into the camera from the same position in *Fleabag*, 00:01:25. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

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