

How 'Fleabag' Seduces Us, Then Accuses Us

She flirts with a priest. Then she flirts with the camera. The fourth wall breaks and — suddenly — we're complicit in her self destruction.

By Parul Sehgal

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It's late. A man and a woman sit together in a garden and agree never to sleep together. He is a priest, lightly tempted but resolute. *Friends*, the woman concurs warmly. Then she turns to the camera and smiles at us, already triumphant: "We'll last a week." This conversation occurs midway through the second season of "Fleabag," the acclaimed series written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge. It's a short, delicately modulated sequence that has been lauded by critics and viewers as one of the most important scenes of television in recent years, for the way it revives the tired trope of breaking the fourth wall. It zaps the viewer awake, reminding us that watching is never neutral.

What happens is this: The priest, played by Andrew Scott, catches the woman in the act of talking to the camera. He senses her attention drift. "Where'd you just go?" he asks. "You just went somewhere." Nowhere, she reassures him and covertly flashes us a look of panic. As the series unfolds, these moments accrue. The woman has a habit of annotating her life in caustic quips to the audience, like a steady stream of tweets, and the priest picks up on the way she slips out of the moment. "What is that?" he asks, as she evades one of his questions, looking at the camera to protest his probing. "That thing you're doing? It's like you disappear."

"Antiheroine" doesn't do justice to the roguish charm of Waller-Bridge's character — anarchy in a tightly belted trench coat with a brightly painted mouth. She is sexually compulsive, self-loathing and intensely lovable. There's shared DNA with other outspoken, defiantly disheveled (morally speaking) women of television, but she has a darkness all her own. She is lonely and grieving for her best friend, who killed herself; her family is chilly and reticent. But she talks to us constantly, in expressions that burst across her face like weather, in sly asides.

How flattering it is to be chosen by her, to be the interlocutor of someone so brazen, wicked and wounded. It's only in that moment in the garden that our conviction frays. In the world of the show, compulsive self-narration betrays, as some critics have pointed out, profound dissociation.

This game of teasing and toppling the fourth wall has a long history, with roots in theater and confrontation. Bertolt Brecht's characters called attention to the artifice of the play to force the audience out of the supine pleasures of spectacle. The device has found a longer life in comedy. In "Animal Crackers," Groucho Marx extricates himself from an awkward moment with two women — "Pardon me while I have a strange interlude" — to confide to us: "How happy I could be with either of these two, if both of them just went away." Breaking the fourth wall is good for a gag (Mel Brooks is its great virtuoso) but also for the connection it establishes between actor and audience, the sympathy it nurtures — think of the helpless looks Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton shoot at the camera and the protectiveness they inspire.

These "strange interludes" have become ubiquitous in recent years, with the rise of faux documentary shows like "The Office" and "Parks and Recreation" and the influence of reality television. Response shots and asides are the new laugh track, the new grammar of so much television humor. The device is so familiar, in fact, that certain styles of reacting to the camera become running jokes on the shows themselves. "He's always looking at the camera like this — what is that?" Karen (played by Rashida Jones) said on the American version of "The Office," mimicking the way Jim Halpert (John Krasinski) mugs for the audience with exaggerated, helpless disbelief.

When characters are primarily oriented to the camera, not to one another or themselves, it alters not only the rhythm of the scenes but the very aspects of the characters we are allowed to see. We don't see private lives, not really. We see characters with their volume turned up, performing with the avid, slightly brittle affect of people at a party, people who know they are being watched and who take an active, carnivorous interest in watching one another. Certainly we take a carnivorous interest in them. Fandom and television are tightly entwined; showrunners play to viewers and to the internet's appetite for dissection.

“Fleabag” cleverly holds up a mirror to the way we watch now. The protagonist is at first a creature of pure performance: “I’m not obsessed with sex,” she says to us, while sitting on the toilet. “I just can’t stop thinking about it — the performance of it, the awkwardness of it, the drama of it — the moment you realize someone wants your body, not so much the feeling of it.” Flirtation is her mode of relating to the world. She flirts with her therapist, with a doctor giving her a breast exam, once with a dog. She flirts with the camera too, looking up at us during the sex scenes, over the shoulder of some laboring lunk. She saves her honest responses and that huge, conspiratorial smile for us; she is ours. But it’s a trick, a fantasy of intimacy.

Fleabag, we come to learn, confesses to conceal. She uses the audience to hide from the other characters, to hide from herself. Throughout the first season, there are flickers of a memory haunting her; only at the end, a terrible truth is revealed, implicating her in her friend’s suicide. For the first time, she evades the camera: As it moves in on her, she backs away.

“I’ve spent most of my adult life using sex to deflect from the screaming void inside my empty heart,” she says flippantly but truthfully in therapy. Detachment and deflection are hard habits to break. “Forget heroin,” the novelist Edward St. Aubyn wrote in the final Patrick Melrose novel. “Just try giving up irony, that deep-down need to mean two things at once, to be in two places at once, not to be there for the catastrophe of a fixed meaning.” The people who come to care for her try to anchor her in the present: “Look at me,” an older woman tells her, taking Fleabag’s face in her hands. “People are all we’ve got,” she says. “Get out there.” The implication being, of course, to get out of her head, where we live, her rapt, adoring audience. Her pathology is our pleasure.

In 12 episodes, we don’t see a character being built up through scenes in the conventional way. We see the opposite. We see her dismantled, speaking less, becoming more opaque, pushing the camera away until the final scene, when she walks away from it and forbids us to follow. The happier she is, we come to realize, the more the show must come to an end; she must extricate herself from an audience, from performance. There is no dialogue in this scene. Without uttering a word, a show vaunted for frankness and wild outspokenness makes its powerful case for privacy.

Parul Sehgal is a book critic for The Times and a former senior editor and columnist at the Book Review. She last wrote for the magazine about Glenda Jackson playing King Lear.

A correction was made on June 20, 2019: An earlier version of this article misstated the episode in which a certain scene occurs. The protagonist says “I’m not obsessed with sex” in the first season’s second episode, not its first.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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