

Research Article

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Fleabag's Pedagogy of the Gimmick<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0156>

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Abstract: As a work of art, the show *Fleabag* prompts differing kinds of judgements by critics. But as a project that reflects life in capitalist society, its gimmickry models the existentially fraught dynamics of despair. Informed by Sianne Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick*, this article explores three sets of gimmicks in relation to despair, where each holds differing pedagogical stakes for viewers: being alone; being a bad feminist; being smitten with a priest. Gimmickry, as a technique within the show, puts viewers on the hook for judging gimmicks as wonders or tricks. Gimmickry as an object of criticism, in turn, brings into view the political and existential significance of *Fleabag* for viewers.

Keywords: *Fleabag*, gimmick, television, pedagogy, existentialism, despair, secularity, whiteness

“Don’t be yourself” – Claire

“I won’t” – *Fleabag*¹

The impact of *Fleabag* on viewers, assessed in a range of ways by critics,² exemplifies an interplay between television and audience members that deserves sustained attention. As a way to draw out the discomforts and delights, as well as concrete dynamics of this interplay, I turn to Sianne Ngai's recent *Theory of the Gimmick*. The very question of who “we” are, as viewers who share membership in the audience of the show, becomes a prompt for us to consider, when we bring Ngai's theory into conversation with *Fleabag*. From the show's devices like direct address to the comedic portrayals of feminists and priests, *Fleabag* solicits judgements from each of us, as viewers. As Ngai points out, however, such gimmicks offer a “fundamentally equivocal enchantment,”³ given that the gimmick hinges on the “social insight that others will be convinced by the appearance whether we are or not.”⁴

This divergence from others, at the heart of the experience of gimmickry, extends to an uncertainty that undercuts our own subjective judgements: is this gimmick a wonder or a trick?⁵ We can see through a gimmick – this is what makes it a gimmick⁶ – and yet it works because it works on us, reflecting and perhaps even reconstituting our desires. Fundamentally, on Ngai's view, the gimmick solicits our

¹ *Fleabag* season 2, episode 3.

² Some interpret the show as cringe dramedy, drawing viewers in through cringe-worthy scenes that depict awkwardness, self-absorption, or eyebrow-raising versions of feminism: Middleton, *Documentary's Awkward Turn*; Havas and Sulimma, “Through the Gaps of My Fingers;” and Simmons, “Bad Feminism.” Others emphasize its origins as a one-person play and experiments with form: Woods, “Too Close for Comfort.” Others describe *Fleabag* as a modern fairy tale, resonant with conventions found in Jane Austin's novels: Wilson-Scott, “Both Absent and Omnipresent;” and Vestri, “Sororal (Misperception).” Along different lines again, others ascribe the show with a “shame-free, publicly erotic orientation”: Goldstein, “Learner, Laughter, Lover, Critic,” 13.

³ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

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judgement of judgement, proffering the very transvaluation of values that the alienation of life in capitalism requires. While gimmicks won't save us, our aesthetic responses to television and its gimmickry can take part in this kind of transvaluation.

Given this possibility, assessing *Fleabag* in light of the gimmicks that run throughout its two seasons, described below, allows for an assessment of its impact on viewers as a dynamic one. The term "gimmick" is slippery. Its negative connotations, while key to its meaning, come and go, depending on how viewers engage with and interpret specific gimmicks at play. In addition, a given technique can slip in and out of gimmickry. This relativism isn't a scandal, Ngai points out;⁷ rather, the fact that gimmicks can be judged differently by different viewers is central to the very operations of aesthetic judgement. As Ngai notes, "suspicion does not come only in one unhappy flavour."⁸ By thinking through three sets of gimmicks, in the following sections, I examine the varying unhappy flavours that *Fleabag*'s use of gimmicky both models and solicits.

While this perhaps is ringing somewhat negatively, since "unhappy" and "suspicion" are terms that point to less-than-positive affects, this exploration affords a pedagogical import to experiences of unhappy suspicion. A more apt term for such experiences is despair, and so along these lines, in this article, I make the case for *Fleabag* as a show that exemplifies a pedagogy of gimmickry that is existentially salient.⁹ This analysis hues closely to Ngai's suggestion that there is a pedagogy to the gimmick.¹⁰ "All subjects in capitalism find something gimmicky," explains Ngai.¹¹ As a work of art,¹² *Fleabag* prompts differing kinds of judgements by critics. But as a project that reflects life in capitalist society, its gimmickry models the existentially fraught dynamics of despair. Each section, laid out below, explores gimmicks in relation to despair, where each holds differing stakes for viewers: being alone (Section 1); being a bad feminist (Section 2); being smitten with a priest (Section 3).

1 Our friend Fleabag

In the opening moments of *Fleabag*'s first episode, we encounter the show's central gimmick.¹³ As the episode begins, we share the perspective of the main character Fleabag, who is staring at a door. The camera shifts, and we're faced with Fleabag herself: she's speaking to us directly. In this first direct address to us as viewers, she's using the second person, narrating events just before they unfold: "You know that feeling when a guy you like sends you a text. and thanks you with a genuine earnest ... It's sort of moving. Then, he kisses you gently." Staring at the camera during this kiss, Fleabag continues, "And you spend the rest of the day wondering –"

Fleabag's musings then shift from the soulful towards the crass, with the quizzical look at the camera depicted in Figure 1. This opening scene sets up a season full of such addresses by Fleabag. While they take a range of tones and oscillate, which Ngai notes often occurs with gimmicks, between "direct address and impersonal pronoun,"¹⁴ this rhythmic turn of the earnest to the absurd is a key motif of season 1. Fleabag speaks to us with pithy narration (sharing gossip about "my sister" and "my father"). She addresses us with complicity (judging the man identified as "bus-rodent" in the show's script, and naughtily noting Fleabag's

⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ The show itself might also be described as pedagogical. For an example, see my seminar (including syllabus, lessons, and assignments) on *Fleabag*, affect studies, and philosophy: https://www.academia.edu/42923329/Outrage_Despair_Rage_a_seminar_on_Fleabag_affect_and_continental_philosophy.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹¹ Ibid., 106.

¹² See Shuster's *New Television* for an account of television as art, akin to film or literature (2); on these terms, television criticism is an expression of aesthetic judgement.

¹³ While Reklis calls this "almost a gimmick" in "Can a fleabag clean up her act?" I've become persuaded by Ngai's work that we can fully endorse the show's (enjoyable and vexing) gimmickry.

¹⁴ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 81.



Figure 1: *Fleabag*, season 1, episode 1.

theft of his money). There's a lot of collusion (celebrating the purloining of a statue and anticipating a prank involving a ninja-caper and Harry). There's also a lot of underscoring of Fleabag's own judgements, at times childish (Fleabag is more right than her sister!) and at times somewhat urgent (the godmother is, indeed, a kind of stepmonster). Fleabag's direct addresses at times take on the valence of authenticity. She betrays an orientation to sexuality that rings closely to Beauvoir's account of the woman in love ("Can't stop thinking about sex. Not the feeling, but of someone wanting your body").¹⁵ She slowly begins a story about her beloved missing friend ("I don't feel anything about guinea pigs But Boo took Hillary very seriously as a gift"). And she takes a few beats, after Martin's ugly trespass, before relaying awareness that this kiss marks new difficulties in her relationship with her sister.

What is gimmicky about the direct address? I've described these discursive moments as if Fleabag is traversing the boundary of the screen, speaking to us and inviting responses, like confirmation, sympathy, or assent. But these moments are gimmicks in part because of this screen-crossing conceit. A gimmick is "a revealing experience of fraudulence," Ngai explains, one that questions its own aesthetic legitimacy.¹⁶ A gimmick is a device, technique, or contrivance, a "not-so-marvelous marvel."¹⁷ It has a kind of charisma, but one that disarms and disappoints,¹⁸ even as it causes momentary delight. As a joke that's repeated too often,¹⁹ or a surprise that holds no real surprise,²⁰ Fleabag's direct addresses model many of Ngai's key descriptors of gimmickry. "When we say a work of art is gimmicky," Ngai explains, "we mean we see through it – that there is an uninvited transparency about how it is producing what we take to be its intended effect."²¹ As Inge Van De Ven notes, Fleabag's seeming-confessions to the camera approximate the kind of self-disclosure found on social media, more distraction than connection, something we see *through* in part because we see it all around us.²² As viewers, Van de Ven suggests, we experience the impact of such confessions as we would experience online marketing strategies, "a way to hail masses while emphasizing individuality."²³ The camera close-up offers the semblance of intimacy that distances, even as it draws us in.

¹⁵ Beauvoir captures this alienated experience of sexuality in "The Woman in Love."

¹⁶ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 312, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²² Van De Ven, "Intimate Distractions."

²³ *Ibid.*, 4. Van De Ven captures this interplay beautifully, arguing that Fleabag's camera-gaze facilitates "an intimacy and sense of sociality turned to currency," 7.

One way to make sense of the camera-nod as gimmick is through this combined play of over-familiarity with transparency. As viewers, we're familiar, perhaps too much so, with the televisual camera-nod. Consider, for example, Frank Underwood's direct address in *House of Cards*, enacting scenes in which the show itself "slyly comments on its own premises."²⁴ Such moments are entirely uncomplicated, and yet they mark a meta-reflexivity in which gimmickry hinges on enjoying while also drawing back from such sly commentary. Here's how Ngai sums up an experience of encountering a gimmick: "Judging something a gimmick ... involves knowledgeable distancing. But it is an experience in which we *do* notice we are dealing with an illusion: 'seeing through it' while simultaneously recognizing its power for someone else. Including, quite possibly, ourselves at a different moment in time."²⁵ A direct address underscores what Stanley Cavell identifies as the ontological nature of films (and TV): that we are sealed off from the world, depicted on screen, in ways that position us as voyeurs rather than participants.²⁶ "[N]othing the camera does," Cavell writes, "can break out of the circle of viewing,"²⁷ perhaps more insistently in moments of camera-nods.

There is more going on, however, in the case of *Fleabag's* addresses. Ngai's work draws on Cavell's account of film (and television after it, as Shuster points out), where Cavell emphasizes the screened-off world of moving pictures.²⁸ Films and television screen whole worlds for us, and importantly, on Cavell's philosophy, "we" are absent entirely from these worlds. We view the world of television unseen (1979, 101), at an impassable distance.²⁹ As Shuster puts it, "Our relationship to [such worlds] can only ever be one of viewing it, not being *in* it in the way that we are in our world."³⁰ *Fleabag's* gimmick is to flirt with this screened-off absence itself. *Fleabag's* direct addresses are a conjuring act, a spell cast on the bar by which we are kept away from the reality of the show's world.

And the stakes are high, to continue with Cavell's account of television-watching. When we're barred from the reality of the screened world, we are also removed from responsibility for this world.³¹ By flirting with the screen, *Fleabag* also flirts with this transcendental condition of impossibility. There's an ever-present hint, in each glance at the camera, that we might be hailed into responsiveness. Each hint fails, of necessity, and yet this conjuring-spell solicits a sense that we are part of the "we" in *Fleabag's* own world. We are hailed, variously, as buddy, wingman, bestie, and jury; moreover, we're potentially co-participants in the teasing of her sister, disdain of her godmother, and distaste of her brother-in-law. In the latter moments, in particular, we know as viewers to expect that her gaze is coming, and the beats in which we wait are simply part of the comedic conceit. There it comes, after the non-consensual kiss from Martin, the glance at the camera – depicted in Figure 2 – that simply conveys, "Gross."

As a technique, *Fleabag's* addresses to the camera each produce a pause, as the close-ups on *Fleabag's* face expand time "at the expense of the linear time of narrative."³² Ngai explains that through such techniques, "discourse time is maximal and story time is null,"³³ as we come to expect these pauses as part of the show's comedic beats. And her pauses give rise to expected surprises, as *Fleabag* completes phrases according to an almost rote formula. In an eerie and beautiful scene, opening the second episode, bus passengers transform, for brief seconds, into dancers. Observing this sudden choreography, synced with the soundtrack, *Fleabag* looks concerned, turns to the camera, and says, "I think my period's coming."

²⁴ Birke and Warhol, "Multimodal You," 152.

²⁵ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 97.

²⁶ See Shuster, *New Television*, 28.

²⁷ Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?," 202.

²⁸ See Shuster, *New Television*; "Rewatching, Film, and New Television."

²⁹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*.

³⁰ Shuster, "Rewatching, Film, and New Television."

³¹ See Shuster's conclusion in "Rewatching, Film, and New Television."

³² Doane, "The Close-Up," 91.

³³ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 118.



Figure 2: *Fleabag*, season 1, episode 3.

This non-surprise comedy, the profundity-turned-profane, is a reassuring echo of earlier moments. As viewers, we're assured of *Fleabag*'s tendency to be flippant, rather than sincere, and we can relax back into the distance that this creates. In this gimmicky moment, *Fleabag* is not inviting us with a "Are you seeing this too?" glance, as she does many other times in the show. But this is another aspect of the gimmick, Ngai explains. A gimmick disarms us from taking it seriously: it snaps us to alertness, Ngai writes, but then we slacken, becoming aware of the form's disappointing poverty.³⁴

Ngai notes that comedy and the gimmick deploy many shared characteristics, including this non-surprise at the heart of the device's workings.³⁵ While affects of gimmickry might differ, including the "comedic, anarchic, irreverent, excitable, angry,"³⁶ what's the same across gimmicks is its status as a "not-so-marvelous marvel."³⁷ For example, at first glance, *Fleabag*'s shared collusion with her sister – seen in Figure 3 – takes the same form as her feigned collusion with us. But, unlike such glances with Claire, we're on the other side of the gimmick, positioned as judges from outside the bounds of the story. To use Cavell's language, our world is outside of the screened world. Cavell explains that "objects on film are always already displaced, *trouvé* (i.e. that we as viewers are always already displaced before them)."³⁸ In the same terms that Ngai uses to describe the gimmick,³⁹ Marc Vernet points to the trickery at play in such moments:⁴⁰ the viewer confuses cause with effect, mistaking the moment of filming (in which the actor gazes at the camera) with the moment of reception, feeling the gaze of the character upon them. The gimmick, in other words, makes use of the very asymmetries between producer and viewer that, according to Stuart Hall, are constitutive of television shows⁴¹ – by overlaying the "exit" of the message (the viewing of the gaze) with the "entry" of the message (the gaze itself).

As viewers, we observe the capers, mishaps, and grief; we bear witness to embarrassment and to the moral abyss in which *Fleabag* is caught in season 1. (We only find out about horrible mistakes that *Fleabag* made, mistakes that led inadvertently to beloved Boo's death, in the last episode of season 1.) But the impasse of responsibility is one that *Fleabag*'s own gimmick reinforces, as reality is "projected, screened, exhibited" rather than inhabited by us.⁴² *Fleabag* as a production underscores the impasse, as well: we

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 78.

³⁶ Ibid., 135.

³⁷ Ibid., 53.

³⁸ Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?," 256.

³⁹ A gimmick can occasion the mistake of "effect" with "cause," Ngai explains, in "Theory of the Gimmick," 485.

⁴⁰ Vernet, "The Look at the Camera," 49.

⁴¹ Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," 510.

⁴² Ibid., 184.



Figure 3: *Fleabag*, season 1, episode 4.

might *feel* Fleabag speaking to us, directly through the screen, but the mismatch between Phoebe Waller-Bridge as performer, as actor, and as autobiographical presence undoes our sense of building a relationship with Fleabag-as-confidant.⁴³ The show proffers moments of communion with Fleabag. These moments, however, occur through a “televisual sign,”⁴⁴ a camera-gaze that is itself a discursive practice, as Hall might put it.

There’s more to be said, of course, about the status of responsibility itself here, as well as about the world that *Fleabag* stages for us. As a way to draw out these themes, I turn in the next two sections to consider the equivocal nature of gimmicks more directly. Gimmicks are equivocal in terms of our own first-person judgements: we can experience something as and then again as not a gimmick.⁴⁵ They’re also equivocal in terms of our intersubjective exchanges about judgement.

This is why Ngai describes the import of gimmickry as the judgement of judgement itself. Ngai points out, “For Cavell, then, aesthetic judgements can never be unidirectional. They not only presuppose but must produce an opportunity for ‘exchange’ in which the other may contest what is said and the assumptions that underpin it.”⁴⁶ In this way, they line up with the nature of aesthetic judgement, as Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt after him make clear. “I judge as a member of this community,” Arendt explains, referring to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.⁴⁷ When I assert my judgements, having been affected by an aesthetic experience, I’m wooing you to agree with me⁴⁸ – not you, a fictional or idealized someone, but you with whom I share community.⁴⁹

Such exchanges of judgement make manifest “the sociality that is aesthetic experience’s condition of possibility”⁵⁰ because my urge to persuade you to share my judgement is constitutive of aesthetic encounters.⁵¹ After all, why are we prompted to seduce others to our judgements, as Arendt predicts we always will

⁴³ Beaumont makes this point compellingly, examining the relations between Waller-Bridge as author, as performer, and as seemingly-incarnated character in “Waller-Bridge’s, *Fleabag(s)*.” Along similar lines, Van De Ven describes Waller-Bridge’s performance as key to the gimmickry in the show, writing, “Waller-Bridge performs facial mini-dramas every time she looks at the camera,” “Intimate Distractions,” 9.

⁴⁴ Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 511.

⁴⁵ In his in-depth study of direct address, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, Brown’s insights into the polemical status of “breaking the fourth wall” resonate with Ngai’s account of the equivocal status of gimmickry (11).

⁴⁶ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 25.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 67.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 72; Arendt, “Some Questions in Moral Philosophy,” 140; and Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” 219.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 67.

⁵⁰ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 95.

⁵¹ See also Hall, “*Sensus Communis* and Violence,” who points to the colonial context of the *sensus communis* that is the condition of possibility for Kantian judgements of the beautiful (258).

be, if there isn't a sense that others might disagree?⁵² Ngai points this out, as a way to get at the divergence or *dissensus* at the heart of intersubjective judgement.⁵³

This is key to the gimmick of the bad feminist, described in the next section. "The gimmick," Ngai points out, "is sometimes less a compromised thing than a compromised *evaluation*."⁵⁴ While framing *Fleabag* as gimmicky helps to explain the range of responses that critics and viewers express after watching the show, it also draws us into a more sustained assessment of TV's relations to judgement, including the judgement of feminism and ourselves as feminists. While the stakes are high here, given the show's own feminist commitments, they intensify in the second season with the introduction of yet another gimmick.⁵⁵ This is the focus of Section 3.

2 Bad feminists

We first meet *Fleabag*'s sister Claire, in the show's first episode, at a feminist event titled "Women Speak – opening women's mouths since 1998." The sisters are there, *Fleabag* explains, because their dad buys them tickets, his way of coping with "two motherless daughters." The lecture begins, and a slight grimace by *Fleabag* signals that the speaker's enjoinings won't work on her. This divergence from the crowd sharpens, a moment later, when *Fleabag* and Claire are the sole attendees to raise their hands, as they fail a test of feminist affiliation. "We are bad feminists," *Fleabag* tells the camera, and the gimmickry afoot here reflects another key quality laid out by Ngai: the fact that, while I might note the dynamics of gimmickry, this recognition depends on the existence of others who fall fully sway to the gimmick's manipulations.

"Bad feminist" is a phrase made popular by Roxanne Gay. "I want to be in charge and respect and in control," Gay writes, "but I want to surrender, completely, in certain aspects of my life. Who wants to grow up?"⁵⁶ This contradiction, in Gay's account, is emblematic of being a bad feminist, and Gay's self-diagnosis sheds light on *Fleabag*'s own existential difficulties as staged within the world of *Fleabag*. Feminists are guilty of gimmickry, we learn, throughout the course of the show's two seasons. This is of course a loaded claim, since to call something a gimmick is both to note its appeal and register its banality. Calling certain versions or strains of feminism *gimmicks* is to call out "the erroneous appraisal of value in general;"⁵⁷ it's a gimmick in part because many do not consider it as such. The experience of noting gimmickry, such as the over-enthusiasms of the feminist lecturer and her audience, is an experience of registering, mentally, "the objectivity of our interdependent interconnectedness."⁵⁸ *Fleabag* herself is registering this backdrop of community when she utters the speech act, "We are bad feminists." All aesthetic experiences hold this capacity to "face others."⁵⁹ Just as Gay concludes her "Bad Feminist" essay by explaining, "I am a bad feminist. I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all,"⁶⁰ *Fleabag* notes the gimmickry at play in feminist community as part of this community herself.

⁵² Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 72.

⁵³ Ngai is citing Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 111–14, here. Readers of Arendt also find a kind of dissensus in Arendt's work. In "Addendum;" and Eribon writes, for example, that Arendt rejects strongly "the idea of 'unanimity.' Unanimity would indicate to her ... that 'people had ceased to think.' For Arendt, there is clearly a great danger in refusing divergent points of view in the name of some unique truth that would be opposed to arbitrariness and multiplicity" (343).

⁵⁴ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 43.

⁵⁵ Phoebe Waller-Bridge's short essays, at the end of *Fleabag*, invoke the feminist ethos at the heart of the show. See Simmons, "Bad Feminism;" and Darling, "The Moment You Realize Someone Wants Your Body," for thoughtful reflections on the nature of *Fleabag*'s feminism.

⁵⁶ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, 314.

⁵⁷ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 51.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18. Ngai is citing Anna Kornbluth here.

⁵⁹ In this context, Ngai includes a helpful citation from Michel Chaouli's rereading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*: "in its very bearing," aesthetic experience "faces others." To say "this is beautiful," for example, is an act, an act of speaking, rather than simply a proposition about an object (cited Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 19).

⁶⁰ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, 318.

The show's comedy often hinges on friction between Fleabag (and bad feminists like her, perhaps "us" on the other side of the screen) and those whose expressions index overdone sincerity. While the "bad feminist" performs the "revealing experience of fraudulence" that is the essence of the gimmick,⁶¹ the foil of the "good feminist" draws out the workings of gimmickry more broadly. Recall that gimmicks work in part because of the ever-present possibility of equivocality. We recoil from a gimmick, Ngai explains, because we "'see through it' while simultaneously recognizing its power for someone else."⁶² This someone else might even be ourselves, at a different moment in time. Going further, Ngai suggests that this capacity to identify gimmickry, enchanting someone else, might be the very condition that makes gimmicks work at all.⁶³ What good would a bad feminist be, without the comedic foil of good feminists? Judging something as a gimmick, on Ngai's account, involves "the more complex negation of another person's judgment of the value of the same object we find unworthy."⁶⁴

And so who are these duped feminists, in the world of *Fleabag*, beyond the attendees at the lecture? They include Harry, quick to weep and even quicker to self-identify with the sentimentality of parenthood. (He is experiencing postpartum symptoms, he whispers to Fleabag, while holding his new child.) And they include the godmother, whose art show titled the *Sexhibition* affords an especially lush experience of gimmicky feminism. It's not solely the objects in the *Sexhibition* that solicit judgement from viewers in the know. It's the nature of the criticism itself. Ngai asks, "Why are we repelled by the style of people's expressions of aesthetic appreciation, when not by the fact or intensity of their pleasure *per se*? And is this not another site over which we find the unmentioned gimmick immanently hovering?"⁶⁵ There's a gimmick to overwrought speech, Ngai explains, that is best described as gushing. "To its hearers," Ngai continues, "it evokes or simply is the sound of someone falling for a gimmick, which is why it repels even when one cherishes the thing gushed over."⁶⁶

We witness such sounds at the *Sexhibition*, which culminate in the godmother's own performance. "Well, I think it's important," she declares to the gallery guests, "for women of all ages to see how my body has changed over the years. I think they have to have a healthy perspective on my body."⁶⁷ Partly the gimmick inheres in her over-estimation of her worth, a narcissism we've come to expect from the godmother. But it points to a more insistent gimmickry, one that good feminists of all kinds are perhaps at risk of enacting and which has to do with the slippage between "my body" and "women of all ages."⁶⁸ The godmother's too-sincere evaluation of her own artistic merit solicits recognition of "a bigger wrongness in the way a society goes about valorization as such."⁶⁹ Gushy feminists evince a bigger wrongness, representing what it looks like to be duped about one's own overarching value, as subjects, actors, or artists. How else can the godmother collapse the differences between their own specificity and every other woman?

The pedagogy of the gimmick, here, gives rise to several lessons. The first has to do with the nature of evaluation, or criticism more generally. Gimmicks are always, in part, about evaluative responses, on Ngai's view, and there can be something gimmicky about criticism itself. "Wrongful praise is of course what we are always indirectly judging when we confront the overvalued gimmick," Ngai writes, "as comes to the fore in our encounters with the overwrought speech called gushing."⁷⁰ The godmother's speech shares a family

⁶¹ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 312.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁷ Season 1, Episode 5.

⁶⁸ In this moment, the godmother sounds uncannily like Hannah Horvath, the main character in HBO's *Girls*, who at the beginning of that show makes a similar pronouncement, acclaiming her status as *the* voice for her generation. ("Or," she qualifies, as her parents impassively look on, "at least *a* voice for *a* generation.") Critics point out resemblances between *Girls* and *Fleabag*, both falling within the genre of cringe dramedy. But my own sense is that each show's commitments to engage with the *judgement* of judgement, which on Ngai's account is the essence of gimmickry, differ sharply.

⁶⁹ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

resemblance with a somewhat infamous celebration of the show *Girls*,⁷¹ as expressed by Emily Nussbaum: that *Girls* is a show “for us, by us.”⁷² Just like the godmother’s speech, Nussbaum’s gushing falls into the category of the duped feminist. The joke’s on the gusher, who cannot complicate the boundaries or dynamics of the “us” that’s collapsed into the “me and mine.”

To a certain extent, *Fleabag*’s comedy hinges on the viewer’s distance from such gushing: we know, even if the godmother doesn’t, that over-affiliation with one’s self risks collapsing the distance that judgement requires. (In the conclusion, I consider the limits of *Fleabag*’s investment in interrogating the kind of universalizing over-reach that the godmother exemplifies.) There can be no wooing another, after all, if exchanges are solely made up of one person, co-opting the very divergence that constitutes community. The joke is on the godmother, not on us, because we note the trespass of her self-aggrandizement. As Stuart Hall might put it, as viewers, we can enjoy the discordant work of interpretation, against the grain of dominant codes, in part because the godmother so fully inhabits those “good feminist” codes.⁷³

But what about jokes in *Fleabag* that do implicate us, as viewers? The second lesson has more of an existential valence, precisely because bad feminism is better than no feminism. A passage from Ngai provides a key for considering *Fleabag*’s own feminist evaluations:

But the gimmick most fully unfurls as a complex instance of evaluation. Like all aesthetic judgments, it is an outward-facing act of address, a perlocutionary speech act, and an improvisatory performance. It is also an invitation to playful sociality around an object of suspicion; a displacement of belief in an illusion that in this very displacement acknowledges its social effectivity and reality; and a transvaluative judgment of other judgments. What we ultimately judge in our spontaneous encounters with its flagrantly unworthy form is the erroneous appraisal of value in general – and through this, an entire system of relations based on the mismeasurement of wealth.⁷⁴

As we saw, scenes like the *Sexhibition* invite us into playful sociality: we note true believers (like the godmother and her acolytes), as we enjoy our own distance from illusions of wrongful value. Other scenes, however, invite us to note a bigger context, a world in which mismeasurements of wealth and worth risk the very sociality that makes judgement possible, at all. This is where the show’s depiction of despair, tangled up with gendered and sexualizing violence, underscores the fragility of seeking other, better values.

This broader context is referenced by Phoebe Waller-Bridge herself, in a tiny essay at the end of *Fleabag: The Scriptures*. Waller-Bridge created the character of Fleabag, she explains, out of a rage that had been growing in her, a rage “at the invisible lectures I felt I was getting all the time about how to be a woman, how to be a feminist.” Rather than supplying tools for undermining such lessons, these lectures reinforced how “the world measured a female’s worth only by her desirability.”⁷⁵ Such a measurement distorts value into commodification and objectification. But while such distortions produce the alienation that the character Fleabag performs, there’s an art to feminist comedy that can render it open for transvaluation. Gimmicks can stage a “meta-appraisal of appraisal,” Ngai explains,⁷⁶ and this is what we encounter in scenes within the show that most capture the objectifying scripts of gender and sexuality.

For example, Fleabag and Claire find themselves at a retreat centre at which two sex-segregated retreats are underway. While the women must keep silent, scrubbing the floors of the centre without speaking, the men are outdoors, participating in a reprogramming project called “Better Men.” This representation of gender-based therapy, while exaggerated to comedic effect, reflect hyper-violent reprogramming techniques like those of Keith Raniere, the subject of recent television docuseries.⁷⁷ Participants, fully in the sway of the therapy, shout “Slut!” at a stuffed female doll, the leader of the session having elicited such shouts.

⁷¹ HBO, 2012–2017.

⁷² Nussbaum, “It’s Different for ‘Girls;’” and Wanzo, “Precarious-Girl Comedy.” See Benson-Allott, “No Such Thing Not Yet” on the tendency in feminist criticism to miss the universalizing whiteness of so-called good feminism.

⁷³ Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 516.

⁷⁴ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 51.

⁷⁵ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 407.

⁷⁶ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 58.

⁷⁷ HBO, *The Vow*, 2019; Showtime, *Seduced*, 2019.

("Patricia" has received a promotion, he explained, asking, "What should we say to Patricia?" This scene hews closely to the scripts of Ranieri's non-fictional cult.) Acknowledging the violence being simulated by program participants, another leader murmurs to Fleabag, who is observing the activity, "Miss, you can't be here, really. It's for your own good."

In *Fleabag*'s world, however, there is existential safety to be found. One man stands apart from the misogynist refrains, offering, "Well done, Patricia" instead of the sexist shouts. We recognize him as the bank manager, from episode one, and we learn that he is guilty of sexual harassment. "I'm just a very disappointing man," he confides. "I just want to move home ... to apologize." "I just want to cry, all the time," Fleabag confides in turn, and the intimacy they generate returns, two episodes later, in a scene in which "we" are not glanced at once. Fleabag confesses her deepest secret – the source of her alienation and aloneness – to the bank manager. "Somehow there isn't anything worse than someone who doesn't want to fuck me... Either everybody feels like this and they aren't talking about it, or I am completely alone. Which isn't fucking funny." "People make mistakes," the bank manager responds gently, echoing one of Boo's appealing lines. Distanced evaluation only takes us so far, in *Fleabag*'s world. It's enjoyable to judge the godmother, suspicious of her and others who aren't in on the joke. But it's vital to find those few with whom to disclose despair and aloneness: to register belonging in the same world.

Of course, Fleabag's gimmickry retains a stubborn presence in this world, as well. "I'm not alone," she tells a counsellor in a one-off therapy session. "I have friends. They're always there," with a grin at the camera. It's tempting to succumb to this gimmick, at last, to feel a part of this screened-off world as Fleabag's friends. Another gimmick calls this temptation into question, however, shifting the stakes yet again, for Fleabag and also for us as viewers.

3 The hot priest

"The priest is quite hot," Claire remarks in the first episode of season 2. "So hot," Fleabag responds, grinning at us.

"On their surfaces," Ngai writes, "aesthetic judgements seem to be about objects they straightforwardly describe." Collapsed in a cab together, en route to the hospital to deal with Claire's miscarriage, Claire's assessment of the priest as hot is, on Ngai's account, not about the object (or the priest himself) at all; such judgements are more about "our relation to other judging subjects."⁷⁸ Instead of saying "I think the priest is hot," it feels more natural and right for Claire to make a seemingly objective claim: such a hot priest. This claim, however, hinges on the possibility of disagreement from others, described above; why else, Ngai asks, "*demand* that everyone feel the way I do about X, with readiness to parry challenges implied, if there's no question of anyone *not* doing so? The assumption or even expectation of dissent seems primary."⁷⁹

In season 2, the priest introduces a new gimmick, and it interrupts the show's depiction of sociality, at least to a certain extent. "Where did you just go?" he asks Fleabag, noticing one of her camera-nods. "You just went somewhere – there!"⁸⁰ Disrupted from her usual rhythms, Fleabag throws the camera a glance of slight alarm, as seen in Figure 4.

The priest has his own kind of magic, one that lets him notice the seeming-exchanges we've been enjoying with Fleabag. "What is that thing that you're doing? It's like you disappear. What are you not telling me?"⁸¹

The priest is doing more, in these moments, than hailing Fleabag away from her gimmicky-tricks. He's making recognizable, to Fleabag and to us as viewers, the existential plight at the heart of Fleabag's

⁷⁸ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 95.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁰ Season 2, episode 3.

⁸¹ Season 2, episode 4.



Figure 4: *Fleabag* season 2, episode 4.

performances. “Don’t be yourself,” her sister advises her; “I won’t,” Fleabag responds. This scene occurs early in season 2, but it points to the riff of despair that runs throughout the show. To not be yourself: this is the most common expression of despair, according to the original existentialist, Søren Kierkegaard.⁸² But to *notice* such despair, Kierkegaard explains, is to intensify despair in the direction of self-becoming. At least, this is what Kierkegaard’s own gimmickry conjures up for us as readers: his use of a religious pseudonym as the author of his most religious texts implicates us in the complex task of discerning where actual spiritual resources might be found.⁸³

This marks the limit, I want to claim, of *Fleabag*’s existentialist leanings. Where the gimmick of bad feminism compels us inward, as viewers, to wrestle with our own complicity with gender norms and sexual violence, the gimmick of the hot priest only purports to offer religious resources. This is my own resolution, of course, of the uncertainty that’s always part of gimmickry. Is something fundamental or frivolous?⁸⁴ Critics have enjoyed the fact that the priest isn’t *only* hot – or foxy, as Andrea Long Chu points out⁸⁵ – but is a hot *priest*,⁸⁶ suggesting there’s a fundamentally religious flavour to the show. My sense, though, is that the priest’s gimmick is one that holds us back from religious invitations like those of Kierkegaard. This analysis hinges on the work that the camera-nod does – and doesn’t – do, for us as viewers.

Let’s turn to a passage from Stanley Cavell in which he points to a key difference in two kinds of exchanges about judgement. When we seek to judge someone’s claims about knowledge, he explains, this takes the form of questions like “How do you know?” or “Why do you believe that?” In contrast, he continues, when we seek to judge someone’s claims about morality, this involves posing questions like “How can you do that?” “What *are* you doing?,” or “Do you know what this means?” The point of these

⁸² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*.

⁸³ It would require another article, of course, to make the case for Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity as a kind of existentialist gimmick. Attending closely to Ngai’s book-length study of the gimmick has suggested to me that such an interpretation could help make sense of the duplicity, the wonder/magic/banality, that runs throughout Kierkegaard’s *oeuvre*. It could also help make sense of Kierkegaard as a thinker, like Marx, Freud, and the later existentialists, who’s keenly attuned to the alienation of existence in capitalist societies. See Jaarsma, *Kierkegaard after the Genome*, for more sustained reflections on these points.

⁸⁴ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 11.

⁸⁵ Chu, “Have a Little Priest.”

⁸⁶ Reklis, “Can a Fleabag Clean Up her Act?”

latter questions about morality, Cavell explains, is to assess another's position, "that is to say, *what position you are taking responsibility for* – and whether it is one that I can respect."⁸⁷

Most of Fleabag's camera-glances, in one way or another, seem to solicit this kind of moral accounting. Did you see that? Did that happen? Am I about to do this thing? Her glances are provocative, not epistemologically (there are no moments in which our understanding of the actual circumstances or claims are confounded by her glance) but morally. If we fall sway to Fleabag's gimmick, giving up the distance required to notice the gimmickry, we partake in this moral adjudication, participants in the exchange. Cavell sums up such exchanges in this way: "What is at stake in such discussions is not, or not exactly, whether you know our world, but whether, or to what extent, we are to live in the same moral universe. What is at stake ... is not the validity of morality as a whole, but the nature or quality of our relationship with each other."⁸⁸

There's a duplicity, of course, in Fleabag's gimmickry. She *might* be inviting us as witnesses to her actions, or more importantly, to her grief and moral self-reckoning. Or she might be courting accusations from viewers that she's relying on an "overly transparent stylistic device,"⁸⁹ bracketing the magic instead of indulging it. This is the risk that Fleabag herself courts, as do we as viewers, and it holds existential import. Hannah Arendt reminds us that "I am my own witness when I am acting,"⁹⁰ even if my self-witnessing makes use of gadgetry like feigned screen-crossing. This is what the priest is pointing to, when he notices one of Fleabag's camera-gazes and exclaims, "FOR FUCK'S SAKE STOP THAT. I don't think you want to be told what to do at all. I think you know exactly what to do. If you really wanted someone to tell you what to do, you'd be wearing one of these."⁹¹

It's not that the priest himself holds such magic that he is crossing over, in such moments, able to recognize or gesture to us as viewing witnesses. Rather, the priest is fully within Fleabag's world, screened and distant from the viewers. And his gimmickry has an impact, within that world. Fleabag's habit of relating to the camera, in moments of moral outrage (the godmother is horrible!) and of moral self-reckoning (am I about to do this bad thing?) tilts towards more intensive self-relations. "It's a love story," Fleabag proclaims at the beginning of season 2. It's a love story with herself, Waller-Bridge amends, in *Fleabag: The Scriptures*.⁹²

Moral querying, like the questions that Fleabag seems to simulate with her camera-nods, holds this potential to intensify selfhood, according to Cavell. Rather than relativizing moral judgements, he explains in that same passage, moral adjudication puts us on the hook as selves, raising the stakes of what it means to become a self in the first place.⁹³ Cavell invokes Kierkegaard as well as Friedrich Nietzsche in this explanation, naming them as kin within the broader genealogy of existentialist thinking.

But there's a useful difference, between these two thinkers, that bears on my interpretation of the priest's gimmickry. Kierkegaard is a thinker who stages critique from within, raising questions and implicating the reader in the limitations of religious life in the name of religion; Nietzsche, in contrast, stages critique from without. "You may battle against the Christian's self-understanding from within Christianity, as Kierkegaard declares," explains Cavell, "or from beyond Christianity, as Nietzsche declares."⁹⁴ So which is *Fleabag* ultimately more akin to, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche? Likewise, which do our own responses align with? These strike me as an instructive question, in the context of a special issue on television's impact on viewers. Can we look to television shows as pedagogical resources for truth-telling, truth-questioning, and similar endeavours? While my own answer to this question is a strong yes, it's in the nuances of aesthetic experience where we can find more politically specific answers.

⁸⁷ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 268.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁸⁹ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 110.

⁹⁰ Arendt, "Some Questions in Moral Philosophy," 90.

⁹¹ Season 2 episode 7.

⁹² Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 412.

⁹³ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 269.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 352.

Critique from within or without? My discussion of bad feminism, above, suggests an interpretation in which *Fleabag* stages critique from within: duped feminists, while not in on the joke, are essentially part of community, and comedy holds resources for redressing violence and alienation in the name of feminist sociality. I'm less sure of the same register of critique when it comes to the show's religiousness. Consider, as an example of the show's impact on religious viewers, a choice by British Quakers to celebrate *Fleabag*'s fleeting depiction of Quaker Meeting. During a sparsely attended Meeting for Worship, *Fleabag* turns to the camera and sums up her experience in aesthetic terms: "very, very erotic." For many viewers, this scene simply repeats *Fleabag*'s familiar profound/profane routine. For Quaker viewers, though, up for the comedy of the scene, it solicits the possibility of a gimmick in turn. Posting the scene on Facebook, the British Quakers issue a cheeky invitation to come to Meeting because "it's very, very erotic."⁹⁵ Who wouldn't want to find one's own local Meeting, after such an account of Quaker spiritual practice?

These viewers can risk turning gimmickry into a gambit of their own, precisely because they know the joke isn't on them.⁹⁶ Gimmickry is always risky, given the inherent question: is this a wonder or a trick?⁹⁷ But there's a backdrop to aesthetic judgement – the *sensus communis* or *sensus dissensus* – that Kant and later thinkers name as its very condition of possibility. This is why there's a pedagogy to the aesthetic impact of television shows like *Fleabag* on viewers. As Kandice Chuh points out, *sensus communis* is the ground of struggle over authority, meaning, and value: "Aesthetic education in its received form attempts to align perception with conception in the production of this common sense; disciplinarity is a name for this procedure."⁹⁸ Critique from within, like Kierkegaard's religious texts, is only effective when it can intervene on common sense itself. It's hard to imagine feminist viewers making light of the duped, gushy feminists in *Fleabag*, like the Quakers making light of the comedy of Meeting for Worship, in part because the stakes for shared common sense are so high.

Recent work on Kant's aesthetics in critical race theory and critical indigenous studies invite us to look closely at the sociality and the "we" that our own aesthetic judgements evince.⁹⁹ The priest's gimmick brings *Fleabag* back to herself and her world; she nods goodbye to the camera, at the close of season 2, ending the gimmick and concluding the show. Restoring coherence to the screened-off world, this gimmickry affords *Fleabag* existential solace – in ways that let us off the hook as morally implicated in this endeavour. Two contrasting examples might draw this out more clearly.

First, at the close of *Angels in America*,¹⁰⁰ Prior Walter turns to the camera and blesses "us" as viewers, in a speech act whose felicity depends upon the magic of screen-crossing. It's our own *sensus communis* that might well be edified, if that show's much more religious ethos translates into some truly non-gimmicky magic. This can only happen if we do either share this moral world or give ourselves over to the duped joy of this possibility. There are political reasons to disrupt such assumptions, however.

Along these lines, second, in a recent book of essays, Billy-Ray Belcourt invokes the fourth wall in order to protest the sharedness of *sensus communis*. "To my mind," Belcourt explains, "one of the most vital modalities of decolonial life is that of remaining unaddressable to a settler public that feasts on our misery." Existentially, on Belcourt's account, Indigenous artists and artwork should remain divergent, not collapsible into the aesthetics of the settler public. There is no shared "we" here, neither in terms of viewers nor in terms of readers. Continuing this passage, Belcourt pivots to another kind of fourth-wall crossing: "Most of the time, writing a book seems incompatible with this."¹⁰¹ This incompatibility hinges, of course, on the fact

⁹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/BritishQuakers/posts/quaker-meeting-its-very-intense-its-very-quiet-its-very-very-erotic-fleabag-you-/2651582534858883/>. For more depictions on Quakers in what this critic calls caustic comedies, see Williams, "Catastrophe and *Fleabag*."

⁹⁶ I thank Tara Pedersen for this suggestion that one type of gimmick is a "gambit," an opening that holds risk at its heart.

⁹⁷ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 49.

⁹⁸ Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 51.

⁹⁹ Fred Moten's rereading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, for example, points to criticism itself as belying or bearing responsibility for the indictment of the racializing, criminalizing logic of modern capitalism – actions that involve "a disruption of the regulative methodological hegemony of understanding," *Stolen Life*, 20.

¹⁰⁰ HBO, 2003.

¹⁰¹ Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*, 95–6.

that settler readers like me are drawn to Belcourt's books, disarmed by formulations like this gimmicky direct address. I feel its sting, though. Whereas the gimmick of the good feminist, described above, is one that plays on the godmother's duped sense of her own value, this gimmick plays on a different conceit. In this case, I do not get to enjoy the distancing effect of judgement, like I would in the case of the gushy feminists. Rather, I find myself negotiating the discomfort of becoming, myself, an object of judgement – a reader, situated within the codes of colonial dominance, all too enculturated in codes of gushiness, rather than solidarity and respect for decolonial projects. In the parlance of *Fleabag*, Belcourt is warning readers like me, "Don't be yourself." "I won't," I want to respond.

Belcourt's gimmick is a risky one, like all gimmicks, but it seems more generous to me than *Fleabag*'s gimmick. There's no real hope, in *Fleabag*, that the godmother's own relations to judgement will shift – because the joke hinges not on her transformation but on our evaluations of her. In contrast, Belcourt's gimmick offers a payoff, but only if there is a shift in the judgement of judgement, including in situations like my own in which settler readers are engaging with the work. Belcourt's decolonial critique-from-within is one that I can read and teach avidly, but it asks me to give myself over to the gimmick as fully as I can: to accept the refusal that Belcourt is soliciting from readers like me, a refusal to gush or be the very target of the joke that, at the same time, I accept that I already am.

Transvaluation is the promise of gimmickry, at least on the account I've been deploying, and while *Fleabag*'s pedagogy might grip us in compelling critique of feminism, the dominant codes and even perhaps the secularity of this feminism could themselves become objects of critical aesthetic attention. Happily, we can look to additional recent TV shows as pedagogical resources for such work – shows like Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You*¹⁰² or Crystal Moselle's *Betty*,¹⁰³ shows that share Waller-Bridge's rage at sexual violence while depicting other moral worlds from which to learn and be moved to judgement, maybe even judgement of ourselves as viewers.

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¹⁰² BBC One, 2020.

¹⁰³ HBO, 2020.

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