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## Fleabag and Metamodernism: Exploring the Intersubjective Space<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper reads the recent British comedy *Fleabag* through the lens of metamodernism, focusing on its interest in intersubjectivity and communication. It pays attention to the protagonist's search for ways of connecting with other characters in a social space that appears to be broken. To do so, it examines three different aspects of the series: the ways of constructing subjectivity, the aesthetics of awkwardness, and the presence of love. I conclude by stating that metamodern theory can help us to better understand the series. *Fleabag*'s cultural relevance and success can be regarded as a consequence of its display of metamodern techniques and sensibilities.

**Keywords:** *Fleabag*, Metamodernism, Post-postmodernism, Intersubjectivity, Awkwardness

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### Introduction

This paper analyzes the British comedy series *Fleabag* as a part of the metamodern structure of feeling. The term metamodernism was proposed in 2010 by scholars Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker to define the moment in cultural history that follows postmodernism. They borrow the term “structure of feeling” from Raymond Williams’ oeuvre, in order to name “a sensibility, a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural” (van den Akker et al. 6). I will particularly examine the series’ interest in communication and intersubjectivity as characteristic of the “post-postmodern dominant” (Pignagnoli 4).

In the next section, I will explain how the notions of post-postmodernism and metamodernism connect, and even overlap, as they serve to characterize and understand the same phenomena. I identify the problems that the characters face as a consequence of

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the postmodern episteme, and suggest that the series explores solutions to these problems. Firstly, I will discuss postmodernism and its decline, to later introduce metamodern theory. Secondly, I will explore the series through the lenses of metamodernism, focusing on its interest in intersubjectivity. In this way, this paper vindicates the relevance of the notion of metamodernism through the analysis of a widely successful cultural product. It also proposes a broad understanding of the word „metamodernism”: metamodern theory is regarded as a new language that allows us to understand and analyze contemporary culture as moving beyond postmodernism.

*Fleabag* is a two-season TV show, produced by the BBC. Its first season aired in 2016 and the second one in 2019. It was critically acclaimed and very successful internationally. The series is based on a theater play written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who is also the main actress and the showrunner. *Fleabag* tells the story of a nameless protagonist, a thirty-something year old woman who lives in London, where she runs a café. Throughout the paper, I will refer to the protagonist as “Fleabag”, as we do not know her real name. As Faye Woods (194) points out, using the term coined by Rebecca Wanzo, *Fleabag* is a “precarious girl comedy”, a series that narrates young women’s lives to explore “the nexus of abjection and precarity” (Wanzo, 29). The plot of the series follows Fleabag’s relationship with her family and sexual partners and her struggles running her business. During the first season, Fleabag’s casual sexual encounters help her process her feelings of guilt after the death of Boo, her best friend. Over the course of the second season, Fleabag seems to be in a much better place emotionally and the conflict arises when she falls in love with the priest that will officiate her father’s wedding.

Throughout both seasons, the source of the protagonist’s problems seems to be her inability to connect with other people. Especially in the first season, Fleabag is shown as a loner, unable to reach out to others, even if she obviously cares for the people closest to her such as her sister, her boyfriend, or her father. Most of the characters face similar problems: they seem unable to communicate. Her dad, her stepmom, her sister, and her lovers are often portrayed as egocentric and lacking any social skills. In this sense, Fleabag’s inability to communicate does not seem to be a personal problem; her inability rather comes from the social climate that she inhabits. I propose that this hostile cultural environment is characterised by some cultural flaws that can be read as postmodern, as the characters lack moral orientation, are socially isolated and narcissistic.

## Postmodernism and its legacy

The aforementioned traits correspond to one particular vision of postmodernism and postmodern culture, one of many different approaches present in contemporary cultural theory – even if, as I will argue, this particular vision has become prevalent. These different approaches have made it almost impossible to have a clear or comprehensive view of what postmodernism is or was. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the schematic glimpse offered by Susan Rubin Suleiman in her essay “The Politics of Postmodernism after the Wall”:

In philosophy, postmodernism was identified as a self-styled mode of “weak thought”, prizing playfulness above logic, irony above absolutes, paradoxes above resolutions, doubt above demonstrations. Some intellectuals found this dance of ideas liberating; to others, it appeared irresponsible and dangerous nihilism. (52)

This second sentence synthesizes a very important distinction. To explain it, I refer to Eco’s terminology in *Apocalypse Postponed*, where he delineates two main attitudes among his contemporaries when looking at pop culture: the apocalyptic and the integrated. In a similar manner, some intellectuals who have theorized postmodernism are “apocalyptic”, as they condemn aesthetically and philosophically the postmodern tradition and consider that it cannot be detached from late capitalism. These critics feel nostalgia for Modernity and are often Marxist theoreticians; Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton, for instance, would belong to this first group. On the other hand, the “integrated” thinkers are the ones who accept postmodernity as the current condition and find some aspects of postmodern theory liberating. They understand postmodern aesthetics and postmodern thought as a way to escape some of Modernity’s flaws, such as the systematic marginalization of the Other, or its totalizing nature. Richard Rorty and Linda Hutcheon belong to this last group; they both explore the potential of the postmodern moment and focus on its emancipatory possibilities. They do not necessarily celebrate the postmodern condition, as they can be critical of some of its implications, but, generally, they keep a positive tone in their writing.

But even the defenders of postmodernism saw its limitations. Its main limitation is that postmodernism could criticize other systems of values, but it was unable to create its own set of beliefs. According to Hutcheon (3), the main trait of postmodern aesthetics is that they “de-doxify” any ideological discourse, no matter if it is emancipatory or oppressive. Hutcheon coined this term, “de-doxify”, to refer to how a certain set of values, normally considered valid, is shown to be culturally constructed. Similarly, but focusing on philosophical thought, Rorty praises the role played by irony in contemporary thought, linking it to the postmodern condition. He suggests that irony helps us seek newer and fairer configurations of reality. The only guideline in this search would be solidarity: the goal of the ironic play would be to expand solidarity within humankind.

This celebratory view of postmodernism had an end date: intellectuals grew tired of feeling this lack of shared values and guidance. David Foster Wallace’s oeuvre is an early and clear example of this attitude towards postmodern aesthetics and values. For instance, in his often cited essay “E Unibus Pluram” he expresses distrust towards postmodern irony and affirms that young writers need a new cultural language. Starting in the late nineties, more and more artists and scholars became “apocalyptic” in their view of postmodernism. Even if they did not feel nostalgic for modernity, they felt the need for new cultural codes and languages. Gradually, scholars who once “defended” postmodernism also joined this trend; for instance, Linda Hutcheon (166) claimed in 2002 that postmodernism, as an aesthetic movement, was over, even if she could not foresee what was coming next.

Metamodernism is one possible answer to Hutcheon’s question, as it is a theoretical attempt to describe the new sensibility that goes beyond postmodernism. As it was

mentioned in the introduction, the term metamodernism was proposed in 2010 by Vermeulen and van den Akker to name the moment in cultural history that succeeds postmodernism. They consider metamodernism to be an emergent structure of feeling, rather than a closed artistic or literary movement. However, there are other concepts that describe 21st-century culture as moving beyond postmodernism in a similar manner: post-postmodernism (Holland; Timmer; Pignagnoli), digimodernism (Kirby), postirony (Konstantinou), or new sincerity (Kelly). These concepts have enjoyed different success and their use and outreach are uneven. Their span is also dissimilar: some describe Western culture as a whole, while others just analyze a specific aesthetic movement. If I choose to talk about metamodernism it is because van den Akker et al. (3) describe metamodern theory as a language or, “at least, a series of linked dialects, to come to an understanding of our current historical moment”. In this way, metamodern theory is able to integrate all these different terms. Throughout this paper, Virginia Pignagnoli’s book on “post-postmodernism” and Konstantinou’s notion of “postirony” will be particularly present. Their work can be considered part of metamodern theory, even if these scholars prefer to use different terms.

But, how do these different authors describe this new sensibility? I will mention five aspects shared by their descriptions of contemporary culture, in order to understand their goals and scope:

1. They describe the overcoming of some elements of postmodernism, as an aesthetic movement, and post-structuralism, as a contemporary school of thought.
2. They understand this shift as a logical consequence of the success of postmodern logic; postmodernism worked as a critical tool when it was counter-discursive, but it ended when it became dominant.
3. The need for a change is described as a practical, ethical or political endeavor, rather than a theoretical one. Often, postmodern theory is held as true from a theoretical point of view, but as unsustainable from a practical one. A clear articulation of this idea can be found in Lee Konstantinou’s understanding of postirony as a way to “render life liveable” (166), or in Vermeulen and van den Akker’s (“Notes on Metamodernism” 5) notion of “as-if”.
4. These shifts are described as a consequence of different historical events, such as the 2008 economic crisis, climate change, the digital revolution, 9/11, etc. These events prove Fukuyama’s idea of the End of History wrong: history has not ended, as there are still political and social challenges that we need to face.
5. Postmodern attitudes are not completely abandoned. Metamodernism is described as the oscillation between postmodern and pre-postmodern attitudes (van den Akker et al., 10).

These five traits help us understand how this change in contemporary culture has taken place. It is also a way to contemplate the enormous span of this shift, as very different cultural practices can be thought of as a part of metamodernism: cli-fi, posthumanism, the affective turn, postcontinental realism, true crime, autofiction, etc. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on *Fleabag*’s interest in relationality and communication. In a culture that is processing and going beyond the postmodern legacy, the exploration of the intersubjective space signals the presence of new cultural codes that serve to face contemporary challenges, such as social isolation and moral disorientation.

## Metamodernism and the intersubjective space: an analysis of *Fleabag*

We have established that the problems that affect the characters in the show are a consequence of the postmodern episteme. The series depicts the protagonist's struggles to find moral guidance and connect with others; the show's main thematic concerns are communication and interpersonal relationships. These concerns meet Virginia Pignagnoli's description of post-postmodernism. Pignagnoli (4) considers that the shift from postmodernism to post-postmodernism can be summed up in a shift from an ontological dominant to a "dominant function interested in sincerity, relationality, and intersubjectivity". The concept of "dominant" was first employed by Brian McHale (in *Postmodernist Fiction*) to describe the shift from modernism to postmodernism and, as Pignagnoli (4) points out, it is "an overarching principle, a principle that for McHale is floating and depending on questions we aim at answering".

McHale established that modernism's dominant was epistemological, as modernist texts asked questions such as "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?" (McHale 9), whereas postmodern dominant was ontological (10), as it posed questions such as "Which world is this? (...) What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" According to Pignagnoli (5) post-postmodern – or metamodern – texts foreground questions such as: "What is to communicate? What is to communicate earnestly and sincerely? Is it possible to communicate earnestly through a text?" As she indicates, a similar understanding of post-postmodernist fiction is present in the work of authors such as Lee Konstantinou, Adam Kelly, and Alan Kirby. These authors, that have already been mentioned, use the terms postirony, new sincerity and digimodernism, respectively. But they all pay attention to relationality, earnestness, and sincerity in metamodern fiction. These cultural values contrast and compensate for postmodern cynicism, playfulness and irony. Even if, as we will see throughout the analysis of *Fleabag*, these resources won't be completely abandoned, the dominant of these texts, their "overarching principle", concerns intersubjectivity, communication and earnestness. To see how these values are present in *Fleabag*, we will examine three aspects: the mechanisms for self-depiction and construction of subjectivity, the prevalence of awkwardness, and the exploration of love.

### A metamodern sense of self: direct address and radical defenselessness

*Fleabag* employs two different modes of communication that present themselves as earnest or sincere, and which never occur at the same time. On the one hand, we find direct address: *Fleabag* constantly addresses the audience, she either speaks to us or looks playfully or ironically to the camera. On the other hand, there are moments of sincere communication between the characters, where direct address is completely abandoned and the protagonist confesses her pain and disorientation to other characters of the show.

The analysis of direct address is one of the main goals of Faye Woods's account of *Fleabag*<sup>2</sup>. She understands direct address as a way to enhance the affective qualities of the precarious-girl comedy. At first, because it contributes to the creation of a feeling of intimacy with the audience. Direct address can be interpreted as a marker of authenticity (Woods 206) because the protagonist shares her most intimate thoughts with the audience; she even talks to us while having sex or sitting on the toilet. *Fleabag* often favors communication with the audience than with other characters; she looks for our complicity, making ironic remarks and mocking her conversational partners. But, significantly, in both seasons, *Fleabag* ends up confessing her pain to other characters, not to the audience. In the first season, she admits her distress to a bank manager, and in the second one, to the priest who will officiate her father's wedding, whom she falls in love with. In both cases, communication with the audience is altogether abandoned while she talks with them. In an interview, Waller-Bridge ("Interview by Build Series") explains her authorial decision:

I wanted the audience to not be the people that she is confessing to. They are the witness that she takes everywhere with her, that she has to maintain her front to. The audience are there for her to always be showing off to, to be saying my life is fine, my life is hilarious, come on in. So she doesn't want you to see the sadder bits in her life.

Here, Waller-Bridge quite directly considers the protagonist's apparent authenticity towards the audience as a façade. Woods (208) notes that: "*Fleabag* interpellates us in place of human connection, but this intimate access is ultimately revealed as a performance". Direct address allows *Fleabag* to feel less lonely, as she is constantly with someone, but our company is insufficient for her, as "we do not return *Fleabag*'s address" (Woods 208). Moreover, direct address contributes to establishing an ironic distance from everything that surrounds her, mainly her feeling of loss, and it is a way to choose how she wants to depict herself, to feel in control of her own story. However, it is sometimes counter-productive and makes her feel isolated from those around her, as she always seems to be above them. In short, direct address fails to comfort the protagonist, which is why she looks for other ways of communication.

To examine how these two modes of communication work and interact, I will refer to Nicoline Timmer's analysis of the work of David Foster Wallace. Timmer (in van den Akker et al. 107) explains that in Wallace's fiction metafiction always leads to an insecure sense of self, that needs to confirm its existence through others' gazes. This idea, according to Timmer (in van den Akker et al. 106), can be summed up in a quote from Wallace's short story "Octet": "Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-at-me". Timmer considers metafiction as a clever analysis of the building of our sense of self, but she understands that subjects who are implied in metafiction – the author, the readers, the characters, and the narrator – end up being too aware of their sense of self being constructed. At least, this happens to Wallace's characters, who feel lonely when they are involved in metafictional schemes. However, in Wallace's fiction, we find solutions, or

<sup>2</sup> There are other articles that focus on the series' use of direct address (Gibbon and Whitely; Wong; Neveux; Shuster). It is worth mentioning them because they prove the rhetorical dominance of this resource.

alternatives, to this cultural malaise: there are other ways of depicting subjectivity that emphasize experiences that bind characters together.

Timmer prefers the term “defenselessness” over sincerity, to underline that the raw, radical sincerity that is at stake in Wallace’s fiction requires complete exposition in front of another person. Likewise, in *Fleabag* honest and earnest encounters with other characters imply the protagonist’s complete exposure. These moments are brief and isolated from the rest of the narrative action, but they are marked as important for the story and character building. They are represented as exceptions to the regular order of things, when the protagonist controls how she shows herself in front of others. Vulnerability is a dominant affect through these interactions. For instance, when Fleabag talks with the banker in episode 4, she abandons her ironic smile and her sneaky looks to the audience, and confesses to him: “I just wanna cry. All the time” (Hampsons episode 4). Her confession is possible because the banker first talks about his problems, so this sense of defenselessness is reciprocal. Later on, in the last episode, Fleabag has a second conversation with the banker, and, again, she restrains from looking at the audience or making any remarks.

The abandonment of direct address during moments of connection between characters continues through the second season. Fleabag falls in love with the Priest, who becomes the only character in the story who can tell when she is talking to us. He will accuse her of going somewhere or hiding something from him when she uses direct address; sometimes, when she looks straight at us, he follows her gaze, trying to figure out what is going on. On the one hand, his remarks prove that talking to us stops the protagonist from connecting with him fully. On the other hand, they contribute to the questioning of the nature of the world that the characters inhabit, as they strengthen the metafictional play. Metafiction here serves to highlight issues of communication and intersubjectivity, as Robert McLaughlin or Mary Holland signal that happens with post-postmodernist fiction.

Interestingly, the Priest’s insistent remarks do not stop Fleabag from using direct address. Direct address is still depicted as a valid way to think of herself and as a means to communicate with the audience, which she is not willing to give up. Moments of defenselessness and vulnerability alternate with direct address, which is associated with humor and irony and allows character-audience interaction and complicity. Somehow, these narrative strategies serve her to depict and explore herself in relation to others; there is a witty, fun, and ironic version of Fleabag and a vulnerable and emotional one. Towards the end of the series, both modes of subjectivity and self-representation are shown as valid. In fact, the character arc is based on her learning to navigate these two senses of self.

The last scene of the series is a very good example of this navigation. As they are waiting at the bus stop after her father’s wedding, the Priest tells Fleabag that he has chosen “god over her”. Throughout this whole conversation, Fleabag does not look at the camera once, as she declares her love to the Priest, and she hears that he loves her back, despite his decision. The Priest walks away and Fleabag’s eyes well up with tears. Still moved, quietly, Fleabag pulls a statue that she stole from her stepmother out of her purse – a running gag in the series. She then looks at the audience, with a complicit

and resigned smile as we hear an *Alabama Shakes* song: “But it feels so nice to know I’m gonna be alright”. Fleabag looks at us again before wandering away, as her bus gets canceled. These last gazes, together with the last song, reveal that Fleabag is not only the vulnerable, defenseless woman who cannot be together with the man she loves, but she is also the witty, ironic, and fun character that we have known for two seasons.

It is worth noting that our reading contradicts previous analysis of the series. Julie Nerveux, looking at this same scene, understands that Fleabag walking away from the camera signifies her “breaking up” with the audience, as we have got too close to her. Similarly, Denise Wong (1708) considers that for the protagonist to connect with other characters and to heal, she has to cease her contact with the audience. Both papers examine the relationship that the protagonist establishes with the viewers through direct address, and state that Fleabag ends up choosing relating to other characters of the show over her relationship with us, because they are truly present and able to comfort her.

In my reading, the oscillation between these two alternative modes of subjectivity and self-representation serves to explore the possibilities for connection and communication in a broken and individualistic world. This oscillation between the two modes can be considered a metamodern resource. On the one hand, we have postmodern irony, as we think of ourselves as being looked at; on the other hand, we find the raw, emotional, and naïve opening towards others. These two ways of address are kept until the end of the show. They can be easily identified, borrowing Denise Wong’s expression, through the analysis of the “structure of looking”: throughout the series, the protagonist looks alternatively at us or to other characters. Beyond these two mechanisms that we have presented as extreme opposites, we have other techniques to explore communication: the use of awkwardness and the exploration of love.

## The aesthetics of awkwardness

Lee Konstantinou (in van den Akker et al.) suggests that the “aesthetics of awkwardness” is one of the main resources deployed by relational art, which is, in turn, one of the main modes of postironic art and culture. Postirony is the name Konstantinou opts for referring to the cultural moment after postmodernism. Relational art “draws attention to the gap between reader and writer, showing the difficulty of deciding whether an utterance is ironic or sincere in the absence of tonal or affective cues, staging the author’s failure to communicate” (Konstantinou, in van den Akker et. al 98). His definition of relational art draws from the work of Nicholas Bourriaud, who coins the term “relational aesthetics”, but discusses mainly visual and performing art, rather than films, series, and literary fiction, as Konstantinou does. Their ideas, as I have mentioned, resonate with Pignagnoli’s thesis: post-postmodernist fiction tends to be interested in communication and intersubjective relationships.

The “aesthetics of awkwardness” serves to explore how the intersubjective space is fragmented in contemporary society, as awkward situations often occur when there is some kind of miscommunication. Awkwardness is one of the most important comic strategies in *Fleabag*. As direct address, it has been at the centre of previous analysis of

the show, as Faye Woods' and Julia Havas' and Maria Sulimma's – whose work delves on the notion of the “cringe” aesthetics. Indeed, a feeling of inadequacy defines the attitude of most of the characters of the show. Fleabag's father personifies this affect: throughout the series, he seems unable to utter a whole sentence to his daughters. Even if it is possible to discern what he wants to say, he is unable to speak coherently. He tries to express love or concern through hesitant sentences that sound awkward. For instance, on the anniversary of his wife's death, he says to Fleabag and Claire, her sister: “You are my... daughters” (Hampsons episode 5). A bit later on, as he is alone with Fleabag, he asks her “Do you have enough, uh, clothes?” (Hampsons episode 5). This inability to normally relate to them also manifests in the lack of physical signs of affection on his part: he seems unable to touch them, even as he greets them. As it happens with his utterances, there is always a hint of a hug or a kiss that never actually happens, producing, once again, a feeling of awkwardness.

Summing up, awkward situations are very common in the series and they affect different characters. The series is an example of what Adam Kotsko calls “cultural awkwardness”. He understands that cultural awkwardness “arises when there seems to be a set of norms in force, but it feels somehow impossible to follow them or even fully know them” (Kotsko 27). Kotsko links the rise in awkwardness in contemporary art and culture with the relaxation of certain social norms in the sixties. As Fordist societies started to be dismantled, certain traditions were abandoned, and there were no clear cultural imperatives that substituted the old ones. These cultural shifts had positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, the relaxation of social rules resulted in freer and more diverse societies. On the other hand, the lack of moral guidance caused unease and disorientation in some people.

For instance, the contestation of the traditional patriarchal family as the only way of social organization opens an infinite amount of possibilities for new ways of life. *Fleabag* describes how the characters try to navigate these newer ways of relating to each other. For instance, Fleabag's father does not understand his social and familial role: he does not know how to behave with his daughters after the death of his late wife. Fleabag herself seems unable to commit to her boyfriend and to talk with him honestly about it, whereas Claire, her sister, is stuck with a partner who does not respect or love her, as she is too committed to her relationship. These situations can be thought of as consequences of their lack of moral guidance, as none of the characters seem to be sure of their decisions, of how to behave, of what is “normal” and “good”. Thus, the feeling of awkwardness contributes to exploring communication issues, but also moral disorientation.

Konstantinou (in van den Akker et al. 100) ends his analysis of relational art by claiming that it is “overwhelmingly affective in its dominant ambitions”. This affective component might seem unclear after discussing the characters' emotional dysfunctions. But we should remember that awkwardness itself is an affect with a patent social orientation. Kotsko (14) explains that “Awkwardness moves through the social network, it spreads. You can't observe an awkward situation without being drawn in: you are made to feel awkward as well, even if it is probably to a lesser degree than the people directly involved”. As Havas and Sulimma (84) suggest, cringe – or awkward – situations in the series even tend to generate a physical reaction. The word “cringe” underlines the bodily

component of these situations, as “cringing usually entails a physical reaction of discomfort in the observer/viewer”. When Fleabag’s family dysfunctionality generates an awkward situation, we sympathize with the characters because we are drawn into the situation, even in the physical realm. Moreover, these awkward situations highlight the need that other characters have for each other and the discomfort generated from not being able to connect. The awkwardness that Fleabag’s father feels while trying to communicate with his daughters is contagious, and this makes his pain obvious to the audience.

Awkwardness is one of the prevalent affects in the series and it exposes the characters’ problems with communication. But the persistence of this feeling demonstrates that the characters are constantly attempting to communicate with each other, despite their difficulties in doing so. Fleabag, her sister, or her father do not give up on these attempts to relate to each other, even if awkwardness persists. This is because these efforts to connect are not completely sterile. Especially during the second season, there is space to talk not only about loss but also about ways of dealing with trauma. In the last section, I will describe feelings of connection, affection, and love between the characters of the show.

## Love and depthiness

The second season opens with the utterance “This is a love story” (Hammond, episode 1). During the first episodes, one could assume that this “love story” is Fleabag and the Priest’s. However, in the last chapter, just when their romance ends, viewers start perceiving other love stories that are adjacent to the main one: the stories of the stepmother and the father, of Claire and her stepson, or Claire and Fleabag. These stories show that love is a prevalent affect in the series despite the characters’ apparent dysfunctional sociability. In fact, in the last episode of the series, Claire declares her love to Fleabag, while Fleabag is trying to convince her to go to the airport to stop the co-worker whom she is in love with. Claire replies:

I’m not going to the airport, he’d think I was insane. How would I even find him? You can’t get through security without a boarding pass. I’d have to buy a dummy ticket just to get through the gate. I don’t know when his flight is or which terminal. Imagine if I knew that. Imagine him finding out I knew *all* that. Imagine if he was just in boots buying a pair of tweezers in terminal five, and suddenly I was there. [...] The only person I’d run through an airport for is you (Hammond episode 6).

In this short monologue, Claire expresses her rejection of the “running through the airport kind of love”, paraphrasing Fleabag. According to Claire, romantic love, portrayed in this big gesture, is absurd and unrealistic. Thinking of going to the airport makes her feel ridiculous and vulnerable. This view matches Claire’s cold personality, maintained throughout the series. But, in the end, she admits that she would make a fool of herself, she would show her defenselessness, just for one person, Fleabag. This shows that, despite their awkwardness and clumsiness, their ignorance of normal ways of showing affection, they maintain a close emotional link, and have a unique and important relationship.

Moreover, Claire finally goes to the airport to meet the man she is in love with. Doing so, she adopts a behavior that she had just claimed to be absurd. Even if she does not “believe” in love, love informs her behavior and her decisions. Love is not valuable because it is deep or universally true, but because it guides the protagonists’ lives. Claire is skeptical about its importance or validity but she acts as if she would believe in love as a guiding life principle. This is why I understand that the concept of “depthiness”, coined by Timotheus Vermeulen (“The New »Depthiness«”), can help us to understand the role of love in the series. According to Vermeulen, depthiness substitutes the modern concept of depth, absent during postmodernity (Jameson). With the new millennium, many artists reconceptualized this notion, prompting “depthiness”: these artists abandoned the epistemological perspective towards depth to adopt a performative one. The fact that something is considered to be deep is the condition for the existence of depthiness. Thus, for depthiness to happen we do not need to discover that something is deep, but to believe it.

This is what happens with love in *Fleabag*: love is not suggested to be a universal or unequivocal emotion, but it is shown to be important for the characters. Its lack of universality is made obvious because love is not pure, it does not “conquer all”. Characters who love each other are flawed and harmful to each other. For instance, Fleabag hurts Claire and her friend Boo, and the Priest chooses god over Fleabag even if he loves her. There is not a pure love that does it all. Relations between characters are often messy and characters feel lonely; their interactions are not only awkward, but sometimes even cruel. But love, as a principle, still guides their performances and behaviors. They do things out of love, so love ends up helping the characters with their general feeling of disorientation. Moreover, the presence of love, especially in the last episode, shows that contact with other people does not only happen during the “defenseless encounters” described in the previous section, but communication between characters occurs all the time.

When he is officiating the wedding, the Priest claims: “Love is awful. [...] It’s all any of us want and it’s hell when we get there! So no wonder it is something we don’t want to do on our own” (Hammond episode 6). Love saves us from being alone but, ironically, it also scars us and makes us need others even more. In this way, love and love practices represented through the series are related to our will to communicate and connect with others. In a *Vogue* interview, Phoebe Waller-Bridge claimed about *Fleabag*: “Deep down, she is a helpless romantic”. Being a romantic, in the context of this essay, implies believing in the possibility of sharing spaces and moments with others. Even if, again, love leaves us defenseless, and it will be undoubtedly painful, we should not stop trying to get closer to other people and make ourselves vulnerable.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that *Fleabag* participates in the metamodern structure of feeling. Most of the characters’ problems can be linked to the postmodern condition, and the solution to these problems seems to be found in the exploration of the intersubjective

space and in communication. As we have seen, different authors, such as Virginia Pignagnoli and Lee Konstantinou, consider this interest in communication as a feature of metamodern fiction. Throughout the paper, I have looked at different aspects of the series that reflect this concern with intersubjectivity. Different scholarly analyses on *Fleabag* have confirmed my thesis, as they are interested in these same features: the use of direct address, the presence of awkwardness and the focus on intersubjectivity and intimacy (Woods; Havas and Sulimma; Wonz; Neveux). In addition, this paper has contributed to the discussion about metamodernism by prompting its understanding as a broad language that serves to describe contemporary culture as moving beyond postmodernism. Moreover, I have proposed five distinct features that help us understand and recognize this new cultural and scholarly language. To conclude, this paper argues for the relevance of metamodern theory to understand contemporary culture and it contributes to the analysis and understanding of *Fleabag*. It has proven that *Fleabag*'s enormous success can be partly explained by its ability to express current cultural and social concerns that can be better understood through the lenses of metamodernism.

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