Could Fleabag be a Parisienne? Camille Cottin’s Star Image and a New French Femininity

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Introduction

1 In the middle of the night, Mouche (Camille Cottin) is walking down the rainy streets of Paris. The camera closely follows her while she crosses the Pont Louis-Philippe and continues on the Quai de l’Archevêché with glimpses of Notre-Dame in the background. Mouche walks past the restaurant “Les Bernardins” before staring at a woman, frantically trying to open the door of her apartment building. The next shot shows Mouche walking across the Pont Louis-Philippe again. The opening credits of Mouche (Canal+, 2019) directly connect the eponymous character of the show to the city of Paris, leading the spectator to assume that this character embodies a Parisienne. This impression is even more reinforced considering that the actor playing Mouche is Camille Cottin, whose star persona may be considered a distinct variation of the Parisian type.

2 However, Mouche the TV show, is in fact based on the original British version of the series, making the original character of Mouche, Fleabag, not from Paris but from London. The British TV series Fleabag (BBC Three, 2016-2019)¹, written and directed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, does not provide the viewers the same connection between its main character and the filmic metropolis of London. Instead, in the opening credits, they are shown the name of the show in white font against a black background accompanied by a scrap of a few seconds of free jazz composed by Isobel Waller-Bridge — music that seeks to capture the chaotic and restless energy of Fleabag, a dry-witted and grief-riddled thirty-something woman who has no social filter. Although Mouche, directed by Jeanne Herry, is a faithful adaptation of Fleabag, recreating the show almost scene for scene with a small number of extra tableaus, the French remake did not meet
the same success in France as its British counterpart. *Fleabag* was rated 4.1/5 by Allociné users, 8.7/10 by IMDb users, and reached an average audience score of 94% on Rotten Tomatoes, whereas *Mouche* was rated 2.6/5 by Allociné users and 6/10 by IMDb users. *Fleabag* received mixed reception on the French entertainment website allocine.fr, as the following comments by Allociné users suggest: “Vulgarité poussée à l’extrême, je pense que l’on peut même parler de lourdeur”; “Quelle déception... C’est vulgaire, sans rythme, caricatural, le casting est prometteur mais au final ça ne vaut rien” and “Je ne connaissais pas fleabag [sic] avant de voir cette adaptation. Tout m’a semblé sonner faux, rien ne fonctionne. Quand plus d’un an après j’ai regardé fleabag [sic], j’ai été sidéré de voir à quel point la série originale est géniale, drôle, impertinente, émouvante.”

Allociné also published an article summarising the overall reception of the series by the French audience, in which the authors argue that the remake is considerably less successful than *Fleabag*:

- Il semble que la comédie ne puisse pas être transposée aussi facilement d’un pays à l’autre : les notes d’humour tombent souvent à plat, faute d’une véritable réincarnation de l’esprit so british de la série dans un contexte français [...]. Les diatribes crues de Phoebe Waller-Bridge, si réjouissantes dans la langue de Shakespeare, ont souvent l’air inconfortables dans celle de Molière, voire totalement incongrues, et sont souvent desservies par une réalisation qui manque d’un brin de folie, et où la bande originale rompt souvent avec l’esprit d’une scène par son style trop passe-partout.

Putting aside the difficulty of transposing British humour to a French context, the framework of this remake offers an opportunity for discussion on the representation of femininity, gender and sexuality on French TV screens demarcated against British television. This article examines Cottin’s star image, considering how it both meets and transgresses the ideals of the cinematic type of the *Parisienne* which may lead us to think that Cottin was the perfect fit to be the French version of Fleabag. However, as Mouche, her persona gestures towards the projection of a female subjectivity that escapes inscription into the French cultural imagination and social practices. Drawing from theories of the abject and the female grotesque as a subversive strategy to challenge gendered expectations in *Fleabag*, the article goes on to discuss the limits of Cottin’s version of the character. It considers how the strategy of breaking the fourth wall, which creates a personalised connection with the character of Fleabag, mimics the personalised and intimate connection to celebrities that social media now offers. Finally, the article posits that Cottin’s on-screen persona competes with her star image, hence threatening to eradicate the space of spectatorial jouissance necessary for the processes of cinematic identification and intimate connection.

1. **Connasse and the archetype of the shameless Parisienne**

Just like many other French stars, Camille Cottin was trained in stage acting in Paris. While working as an English teacher, Cottin first took classes at the Jean Périmony drama school and the company Théâtre Voyageur before joining the Troupe de Pierre Palmade in 2009. After playing minor roles in a number of films, *Yamakasi* (2001) and *Il était une fois, une fois* (2012) for instance; and TV series, such as *P.J.* (France 2, 1997-2009) and *Femmes de loi* (TF1, 2000-2009), she rose to prominence four years later with the
prank series Connasse (Canal+, 2013). This candid camera show gathered 70 episodes of no longer than 90 seconds each, directed by Eloïse Lang and Noémie Saglio. Each episode follows the everyday exploits of Cottin who portrays a provocative, shameless, and obnoxious young Parisian woman who never hesitates to say out loud what she thinks. The rapid success and popularity of the series led to the production of the feature-length film, Connasse, Princesse des cœurs (The Parisian Bitch), in 2015, for which Cottin received a César award nomination for Most Promising Actress. It was this success gravitating around Connasse, that brought about the conflation of Cottin with the character of the Parisian bitch. As Cottin herself states: “Even in the TV and film industry, people thought I was this senseless bitch. It felt as if I was the only one who knew I was a professional actor playing the part of a clown.” Cottin's star persona thus became synonymous with the comical and senseless character she played on screen in Connasse. More importantly, it is her role in Connasse that led the groundwork for Cottin’s Parisienne iconographical profile, associating her to the image of the Parisienne, and by extension French femininity. As Felicity Chaplin points out, the cinematographic type of the Parisienne draws on an iconography derived from a diversity of sources — from literature, the visual arts and popular culture of nineteenth century France — that form an ideal of Parisian femininity ingrained in French culture. Chaplin defines this type as being strongly associated with the modernity of Paris and construed around interconnected concepts of visibility, mobility (both spatial and social), fashionability (including self-fashionability), cosmopolitanism, and danger, which often ties in with prostitution. Chaplin’s methodology can be applied in this discussion as the character of the “Connasse”, although far from being associated with prostitution, is still strongly connected to notions of mobility, fashionability and cosmopolitanism.

Indeed, the “Connasse”, or Camilla as she is later known in the film, is inextricably linked to the spatial dimensions of the metropolitan city of Paris. Each episode is shot at various locations that are often iconic to the experience of the French capital such as in Les quais (S01E02), Les puces (S01E07), La terrasse (S01E10) and Le métro (S01E35). When the character leaves Paris to go to Saint-Tropez (Saint-Tropez - S01E68) or in the provinces for instance, her status as a Parisienne is emphasised. La Province (S01E69) opens on the “Connasse” crossing a vineyard while shouting “Taxi! Les vignerons! Y’a pas une borne de taxis par ici? Il faut que je rentre à Paris d’urgence, je ne me sens pas bien!” which confirms her discomfort and feeling of displacement when outside of Paris. However, her attachment to Paris does not prevent her from travelling to London in Princesse des cœurs. The plot of the film stresses the character’s intention towards social mobility: she decides to go to London in order to find and marry Prince Harry after declaring “je n’ai absolument pas la vie que je mérite et je ne veux plus jamais travailler.” She changes her mode of dress and gestures to appear wealthier and introduces herself as “Camilla the Comtesse of Paris intra-muros.” Further to this, her mobility between the two metropolises of Paris and London also shows that she is cosmopolitan. It is with her franglais that she makes herself visible and heard as distinctly French, for example when she nearly gets herself run over by a London bus and exclaims “but the cars are not going the right way, bordel de shit!” Arguably, the mix of both English and French throughout the film conveys a satirical image of French people, but also reinforces the character’s identity as a Parisian in London.
The series and the film also establish a connection between the main character and fashion. Styled by Béatrice Lang, the “Connasse” is dressed differently in each episode, providing a wide range of outfits, and maintaining her sense of fashion as effortless but elegant twenty-first century Parisian. More importantly, the show also references iconic Parisienne female actors. For instance, the series was advertised with the photos of Cottin dressed in black trousers and a black top, wearing a leopard coat, minimal make-up, red lipstick and with her hair loose and slicked back, in a way that is reminiscent of Catherine Deneuve’s look in her signature leopard print Yves Saint Laurent coats (see Fig.1). Similarly, in Princesse des cœurs, when Camilla dresses up to remain incognito, she puts on a blond wig and a pink dress emulating Brigitte Bardot’s doll style from the 1960s, which ironically draws even more attention to her (see Fig.2). The intertextual references to these two Parisian fashion icons are a way for the character of the “Connasse”, or Camilla, to remind the viewer of her identity as a Parisienne and claiming her connection to Parisian fashion. Further to this, when considering Bardot’s emblematic image of a new type of femininity — controversial and embodying a form of “resistance” to her objectification — such references are also a way to relate the character to other French subversive female personae (and stars).

Fig. 1: The “Connasse” wearing her leopard coat in S01E30 La boîte de nuit
Where the character of Camilla differentiates herself from the Parisienne cinematographic type as defined by Chaplin, is in relation to the concept of danger, or prostitution. Relying on Walter Benjamin’s reflections from the Arcades Project and Abigail Salomon-Godeau’s observations on Parisian women, Chaplin explains:

la Parisienne is frequently associated with prostitution, whether in the narrow, literal sense of the purveyor of sex, or in the more general sense of the “seller and sold in one”, both the object and subject of consumption. […] Both Paris and la Parisienne carry connotations of desire, pleasure and prostitution.

In other words, the femininity of the Parisienne seems to be defined by its ability to consume and be consumed, being both the object of desire and fear to men. From this approach emerges the Parisienne type as a femme fatale, which lingered from both Symbolist and Decadent literature and visual art to films noirs. While the Paris of the nineteenth century can be associated with ideas surrounding desire and consumption of the female body, the character of Camilla seems to signal a moving away from this association. Instead, it is by the forthrightness of speech and insolent conduct that the character of the “Connasse”/Camilla adds to the cinematographic type of the Parisienne of the twenty-first century.

In that sense, the Parisienne’s correlation with ideas of danger and threat no longer has to do with the consumption of the female body, but rather with her propensity to speak out and her stark impudence. On the one hand, Camilla is a threat to the people around her because of her disrespect of social rules, and violation of the expected rules of social interaction. This aspect, along with her blatant narcissistic personality, contributes to one of the humorous dimensions of the show as the character often speaks out loud what the spectators have often been thinking to themselves, not daring to voice their opinion on the basis of politeness and decorum. On the other hand, as it has been argued in feminist discourse, language is one of the instruments of power, and speech is understood as part of an emancipatory effort. The character of the “Connasse”/Camilla thus provides a different kind of agency to the Parisienne type: she is a “caricature de Parisienne arrogante et sans manièr” and the “archétype de la
Parisienne sans gêne™”. Her strongly opinionated, cynical, impudent personality contributes to her provocative behaviour thus embodying a form of femininity emancipated from the constraints of French decorum, which may be called an “insolent Parisienne.” Arguably, when considering nineteenth century representations of the Parisienne, this conceptualisation of the Parisienne can already be noted in Manet’s notorious Olympia (1863) exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1865. Indeed, while associated with prostitution, the representation of Olympia is first and foremost a breach of decorum through the treatment of the formal aspects employed by Manet. Not only does her naked body breach the Salon expectation of nude decorum, but her gaze, which confronts the viewer by looking at them straight in the eyes, gives Olympia an assertive agency, which at the time destabilised the male agency of the one-way prescriptive male gaze. To this extent, Manet’s Olympia is above all a representation of female disobedience and one of the early instances of the representation of the “insolent Parisienne” — a version of the type that also inscribed itself in the star persona of Cottin.

2. Camille Cottin’s star persona: a model of insolent Parisienne?

In his approach to star theories, Edgar Morin explains: “[the star] is more than an actor incarnating characters; he [sic] incarnates himself [sic] in them, and they become incarnate in him [sic].” In other words, a conflation of on and off-screen identities is a recurring element when considering the profile of stars. Chaplin notes that this is particularly the case when female Parisienne actors in Parisian films, play Parisienne characters and, in turn, the characters infect the star personae of these actors. Chaplin looks at how star personae of female actors such as Brigitte Bardot, Jeanne Moreau, Anna Karina and Charlotte Gainsbourg for instance, contributed to the Parisienne type in cinema and how, reciprocally, the type has inscribed itself on the star personae of these stars. Chaplin concludes that “this conflation of on-and off-screen identities creates a distinctly Parisienne iconographical profile for these stars, and each in her way contributes to the reworking of the Parisienne type.” This lens can be used to examine Camille Cottin’s iconographical profile as an “insolent Parisienne”. This can be identified through her performance in TV series and her extra-cinematic activities — which, according to Vincendeau include trade promotion and publicity; and commentaries/criticism.
When examining other roles Cottin has taken up in TV series, a certain continuity becomes apparent. Cottin even pointed out the amalgamation of her characters on screen: “Il y a eu Connasse et on m’a dit Andréa dans Dix pour Cent, encore une connasse ! Dans Larguées, Rose, encore une connasse ! Et là, Mouche... mais la comparaison ne fonctionne pas à tous les niveaux.” As Andréa Martel in Call my Agent! (Dix pour cent, Netflix, 2015-2021), Cottin portrays a lesbian star agent from the Paris talent firm A.S.K. The character is self-assured, strong-headed and has an emotional coldness (see Fig. 3). In Sigourney (S04E05), Andréa goes to her child’s day-care centre to apologise about her attitude in a previous episode: “Je m’en rends bien compte, je n’ai pas du tout été à la hauteur de la philosophie de cette crèche que je trouve admirable et que je soutiens à 100 000%. Oui, j’ai été égoïste et manipulatrice, sournoise... goujate... veule ? Enfin, j’ai été une horrible personne.” This scene may be interpreted as a summary of the character’s personality throughout the series. More importantly, Andréa has now become strongly admired in the press and on social media for her sense of fashion, being labelled as “the most universally chic”. Anne Schotte, the costume designer for the show explains to The Guardian:

[i] build characters according to a number of sartorial personas well entrenched in French — and particularly Parisian — culture. Quintessential Parisienne And rea Martel (played by Cottin) embodies a sense of chic synonymous with “effortlessness, as much as go-getter style” [...] She is stylish enough to represent actors, but her clothes never speak louder than her.

Just like the “Connasse”/Camilla, Andréa is a Parisienne who displays a degree of insolence and is characterised by sartorial qualities.

Hélène is another character portrayed by Cottin for the TV series Killing Eve (BBC America, 2018-2020). Although not a leading part, this character appears in 4 episodes of season 3 (S03E03, S03E04, S03E06 and S03E07). Hélène is French and she is a high-ranking member of The Twelve, a shadow organisation that hires assassins to carry out their dirty work. Again, Cottin portrays an elegant and stylish female character, which a number of fans identify as Parisian. This time, she performs in English in a series created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. In Beautiful Monster (S03E07), Hélène takes Villanelle (the leading character and notorious assassin of the show) in her arms (see Fig. 4):

Fig. 3: Camille Cottin as Andréa Martel in Dix pour cent (S04E03)
HÉLÈNE. Do you know why I love you Villanelle? Because you’re an agent of chaos. And I love chaos. Chaos disrupts. It rips apart and starts again. It’s like a forest fire. It burns, it clears. It’s monstrous, but it’s beautiful. (She kisses and strokes her hair.)

You’re a beautiful monster, Villanelle. Monstrous people like you often feel like they have to fly solo, like they have to keep things bottled up inside them, thoughts, feelings... secrets. And that can affect their ability to be truly monstrous. Do you have anything you would like to get off your chest, Villanelle? Has something happened recently?

VILLANELLE. I did something bad to my mother.

HÉLÈNE. Whatever it is, you can tell me. I don’t want us to keep secrets from each other.

VILLANELLE. I took a shit in her shoe when I was three. A really big one.

At the end of the conversation, Villanelle thanks her “for the inappropriate touching.” Hélène, a French woman who likes chaos and hugs a psychopath assassin, is once more an outspoken, insolent, and even violent, female character that provides a continuity with Cottin’s previous roles.

Fig. 4: Camille Cottin as Hélène in Killing Eve, Beautiful Monster (S03E07)

Through this cycle of Parisienne characters, the press has cultivated the conflation between Cottin and the characters she has played. In 2019, when interviewed about her roles in her two upcoming films Les Ébouls (Sarah Suco, 2019) and Chambre 212 (Christophe Honoré, 2019), Cottin notes how these roles break away from the usual characters she has portrayed on TV and in cinema: “C’est vrai qu’avant ces deux films on me retenait surtout pour mon côté frontal […]. Des rôles avec une certaine forme de violence ou, en tout cas, des tempéraments très affirmés. Je suis heureuse d’aborder autre chose.” In the same interview, the journalist questions the idea of violence present in the characters she has previously played. Cottin answers: “Elle est en moi, c’est quelque chose d’animal, de pulsionnel. Mais je ne sais pas d’où elle vient.” In fact, the subsequent parts Cottin played on the big screen continued to retain elements from the “Connasse” and Parisienne persona. In Telle mère, telle fille (Noémie Saglio, 2017), Cottin’s character Avril seems to have her life in order, but when she falls pregnant at the same time as her mother who lives her life like a teenager, their relationship unravels and Avril loses her social filters. In Larguées (Eloïse Lang, 2018), Cottin plays the part of Rose, a free-spirited woman in her thirties who, with her sister, takes her
depressed mother to the island of Réunion. Rose never hesitates to speak her mind, not even when she explains to a child what menopause is. That the characters of Avril and Rose retain elements of the “Connasse” is not surprising as these films are directed by the creators of the series Connasse. In Photo de famille (Cécilia Rouaud, 2018) Cottin is now Elsa, a Parisienne who grew up in a dysfunctional family. While she struggles to fall pregnant and thinks the whole world is against her, her parents nickname her “dragon”. Symbolically, in one of the opening scenes, Elsa asks her father to drop the nickname because it gives her nightmares in which she sees herself as a monster that defecates from its mouth. This element hints at the fact that Cottin’s character is once again an outspoken, not passive, woman. It is perhaps with her character in Les Éblouis that Cottin’s persona seems to shift completely from the insolent Parisienne as her character Christine, a mother, and her close-knit family are sucked into the fanaticism of a religious community in a French provincial town. However, a number of scenes, such as when Christine undergoes exorcism and screams “Faites-la sortir de ce corps!” and when she impulsively yells at another member of the community during a playground game and is reprimanded by the priest, seem to echo traces of the personality of her former characters that Cottin is trying to suppress. In a different interview, she explains:

C’est vrai que l’on me propose souvent des personnages de femmes fortes qui n’ont pas peur de dire ce qu’elles pensent, qui s’assument l’égalité vis-à-vis des hommes et ne se placent pas en objets de désir... Ce qui n’est pas forcément ce que je suis tout le temps ! Disons que cela reflète ce que j’aimerais être. Aujourd’hui, on a envie de voir des personnages féminins qui prennent les choses en main, qui avancent.

As Vincendeau has argued, one of the characteristics of French star system is the stars’ power decision, which gives them the possibility to control their image. Cottin is an example of this: after Connasse, she has demonstrated a form of resistance in the media and her choice of roles in TV series to shape and refine her image to ultimately take part in a broader discourse on depictions of femininity in French culture. In an interview for Madame Figaro, Cottin explains that her first role in the eponymous series Connasse was a way for her to get herself known, and continues: “Après le succès de la série [Connasse], puis du film, il m’a juste fallu inventer la suite. Et convaincre que je n’étais pas qu’une... justement.” Journalists in press releases have also consistently indicated that Cottin had nothing to do with the character of Connasse, which has, instead of convincing the French public that it was not the case, allowed Cottin to nuance her persona in the eyes of the French audience. Through her choice of assertive female roles, such as Andréa Martel, Hélène and arguably Mouche, Cottin sought to shape her own star image, moving away from the insolent Parisienne and towards an unruly and assertive Parisienne instead.

Cottin has also cultivated this persona through extra cinematic activities, including advertising and support for feminist actions. In 2018, Cottin featured as a muse in Chanel’s campaign for its J12 unisex watch. Two black and white mini-films directed by Eloise Lang are “infused with humour, wit and insolence” and show Cottin as “a playful depiction of a spirited woman.” In the first film, Suis-moi, Cottin rushes to the cinema Le Champo in Paris’ famous Quartier Latin, and inadvertently injures her partner (Syrus Shahidi) and quips: “Pardon, je contrôle pas ma force.” In the second film, Ceramic takes a dive, Cottin leaves her partner stunned on the Pont Louis-Philippe as she jumps in the Seine River to catch a water taxi, then confidently explaining to the driver about her partner: “C’est pas grave, il va nous rejoindre en trottinette.
électrique". Asides from being strongly associated with the Parisian urban landscape in this advertisement for a Parisian brand, Cottin also maintains the Parisian type’s association with consumer culture. However, Cottin’s Parisian persona in this advertising campaign fuels the image of a new Parisian type: a Parisienne who embodies strong femininity. This aspect of Cottin’s star persona can also be reinforced when considering Cottin’s involvement in feminist actions. In 2019, she took part in the movement against femicides in France. The same year, she founded, along with Shirley Kohn, Malmö Production, a film production company that “develops documentaries relating to important social issues such as women’s rights, equal opportunity, and migration, from a feminist perspective.”

More recently, the French magazine Les Inrockuptibles flags Cottin’s star persona as the embodiment of a new French femininity: “Presque mine de rien, [Camille Cottin] est devenue l’une des actrices centrales des séries françaises, dans des rôles féminins novateurs.” In addition, when reflecting on her own star persona, Cottin explains: “Je représente peut-être une féminité moins traditionnelle et peut-être que certaines cinéastes cherchent un double fictionnel, comme une extension d’elles-mêmes, chez une actrice — ou un acteur d’ailleurs.” In this sense, Cottin is fully aware of the fact that her star persona challenges previous constructs around French femininity, which to a certain extent further challenges referential iconic representations of the Parisienne. This idea has also been argued by French film producer and actor Dominique Besnehard, who produced the series Dix pour cent and the film Les Éblouis: “Elle est l’incarnation de la femme des années 2020. Elle a apporté quelque chose de très moderne, avec son audace et son physique. Elle a une forme de beauté qui épaté et, en même temps, à laquelle on peut s’identifier.” Cottin, through her on and off-screen personae, thus embodies the new, contemporary and transgressive Parisienne on TV screens.

3. Fleabag, the abject and the grotesque

Discussion of Camille Cottin’s star image as a new transgressive form of the Parisienne type, created through her TV performances and her extra-cinematic activities, naturally leads to the assumption that Cottin could be deemed a perfect on-screen match to take on the role of Mouche in the eponymous French adaptation of the British TV series Fleabag. This idea was particularly reinforced in a number of interviews in which Cottin highlights the similarities between herself and the character:

Cottin, who lived in London as a teenager, said she discovered the series when her sister, an editor, was working on a documentary about women’s sexuality in British TV shows and recommended it. “She said: ‘You have to see this; the sisters are us.’ I watched it and it made me hysterical with joy and happiness.”

Cottin also points out that just as the title of the British show was named after Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s nickname as a child “Fleabag”, the French show was named “Mouche” after Cottin’s nickname “Camouche”. However, the form of transgression associated with Cottin’s star persona clashes with that of the character of Fleabag who, more than playing on insolence, enacts a version of femininity that is socially abject by virtue of her more overt transgressions.
In her essay “Women in British TV comedy,” Mary Irwin identifies *Fleabag* as falling in the prevalent tendency of showing “physically and verbally unruly and assertive female behaviour.” She explains:

Most recently a clutch of comedies have tackled this idea of fitting in, considering what women, particularly younger women, feel it takes to fit in and be what they think is expected of them. Such series tackle female insecurity, feelings of inadequacy, and on occasion ultimately disinclination or refusal to enact the expected performances of femininity.

In this sense, *Fleabag* is an anatomy for navigating the jaded world of women millennials through dark humour and acerbic wit to contravene prescriptive gender stereotypes. Indeed, Fleabag herself operates to both subvert and redefine normative roles and expectations of femininity. In doing so, she often enacts “transgressive” acts within the context of everyday activities to the squirming fascination of the audience. The overall narrative arc of *Fleabag* essentially presents a woman who is equally conventionally attractive, privileged, and far from the patriarchal preference of passive and discrete. Fleabag challenges both patriarchal expectations of womanhood and of second wave feminism; namely, to resist the singularly self-objectifying trap of wanting to be physically attractive and sexually desired. Instead, she is flawed, promiscuous, foulmouthed, hypocritical, grotesque, selfish and cruel. This is exemplified in the first episode when Fleabag goes to a feminist lecture with her neurotic sister, Claire, where the lecturer asks the audience to “raise [their] hands if [they] would trade five years of [their] life for the so-called perfect body.” The two sisters raise their hands and Fleabag comments that they are “bad feminists.”

It is her self-involved, self-abasing nature that in fact both covers and unashamedly draws attention to her deep seeded angst, insecurities as well as desires. Whereas Fleabag talks openly about everything from masturbation to defecation, Claire is the opposite of her as her character’s prim and properness points to conservatism more generally in society. Indeed, Fleabag’s sister is constantly aghast and repulsed by her sister’s lack of social filters and toilet humour.

The pleasure Fleabag gets in making Claire squirm with her crudeness and sly provocation is part of the audience’s perverse pleasure also. Fleabag’s relaxed approach to casual sex — indeed obsession with it as she states, deadpan to the camera “I’m not obsessed with sex, I just can’t stop thinking about it” (S01E01) — further places her as a threat to the normative, in other words sexually restrained, expectations of women. In this sense, she actively leans into sexual characteristics of the temptress, and at the same time, enacts a bawdy, dirty-mouthed form of humour not befitting of a woman, that is understood as doubly dreaded by men because it is also witty, intelligent and cutting. As Irwin argues, *Fleabag* is about female uncomfortableness, insecurity, and inner and outer ugliness. It moves far beyond the benign ineptitude [...] to unravel and explore painful and deep-rooted truths about femininity, society’s expectations of women, and women’s expectations of themselves.

What the character of Fleabag reveals is both the enduring conceptualisation of women as physically and socially grotesque, and the disquiet when women shift out of the parameters of social behavioural expectations. This is not just in relation to sex or smut talk. In season two of *Fleabag* the storyline publically addresses and normalises topics of abortion and miscarriage, and Fleabag’s transgression includes the profaning of the sacred as she instigates a relationship with a Catholic Priest (the ‘Hot Priest’). While
Mouche was not made into a second season, how Fleabag’s character develops only reinforces her dry-witted violations of the “normative”. Although Cottin’s on-screen persona consistently gestures towards characters who transgress normative views and expectations of femininity, it had never been associated with what Fleabag’s character innately embodies: the feminine grotesque and abject.

The grotesque is defined by Margaret Miles in her essay “Carnal Abominations,” in which she addresses the influence of Western Christian ethics on enduring associations between woman and the grotesque, and the assumption of woman as corporeally other. Miles states that by virtue of the figure of Eve, with her “perversely bent rib” and dubious status as the embodiment of sexual temptation, in the Christian world every woman was seen as essentially grotesque. As Miles explains, in theological understandings the grotesque applies to woman as “the creature closest to the male subject but innately, and disturbingly different from men.” Based on this historical framework, woman has become socially constructed as the exemplar of grotesque difference, distinctly “material, corporeal and sexual.” The classical Western and Judeo-Christian tradition has upheld this bias with the hierarchy between the male and female body. In this sense, the female body operates as the antithesis to its more noble and spiritual male counterpart. Elizabeth Grosz summarises this succinctly with her statement that today, women remain “somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men.” As Grosz’s quotation makes clear, it is the female body that is so associated with nature and the natural. Because of this, the opposition between mind and body remains correlated with an opposition between male and female. The female body is regarded as enmeshed in her bodily existence in a way that makes attainment of rationality questionable, and her form always grotesquely other and abjectly lesser.

It is the abject that is furthermore identified by many contemporary scholars, notably Julia Kristeva, as a site of the feminine. In the poststructuralist sense, the abject is harnessed as a term that relates to the breakdown of the body and that which is discarded from it (bodily waste, and the wounded, diseased and dead body). The term also relates to qualities and states that disturb rationality and order, such as the social hierarchy of men’s bodies over women’s. The abject consequently operates as a sudden challenge to the symbolic order; in other words, the social dictates that permeate society and culture, including bodily conventions. Accordingly, the abject resides where logic and order become unstable. In her oft-cited formulation Kristeva points to how, in psychoanalytic terms, the archaic mother stands as the symbolic mother for all humanity, and by virtue the abject. In addition to representing the primordial infant-mother bond prior to the child entering the symbolic order, she represents the abject nature of the body and social inappropriateness. This idea is analogously alluded to in the first episode of Fleabag, in a conversation between Fleabag and her awkwardly British father:

FLEABAG. I have a horrible feeling that I’m a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman, who can’t even call herself a feminist.
FLEABAG’S FATHER. Well, er... You get all that from your mother.
FLEABAG. Good one.

Even if it is an off the cuff comment from her father to deflect from his own emotional distance from his daughter, all that is debased in Fleabag is ultimately linked back to the pre-symbolic mother/daughter bond. According to Kristeva, the mother also represents fecund corporeality through her power of renewal and destruction — all of
which are catalysts for awe, fear, and horror. The female body then, in both reality and as an archetype, figuratively and literally exists as the epitome of disgust through its regenerative functions and its relation to the abject.

The grotesque and abject, however, have a strong contemporary history of being harnessed in the creative practice of subversive intent. For decades women have enacted a process of reclaiming the abject in order to both underscore repressive historic dictates and bring new agential meaning and intent. In her writing on the topic, Mary Russo contends that the female grotesque in contemporary culture can transgress strict moral and social (including religious) expectations of the body and its actions. In arguing this, Russo proposes two interconnecting modes of grotesque transgression. One is the social grotesque body, the active carnivalesque display of transgression in the public context. The other mode of grotesque is the psychological space, or more precisely, the “cultural projection of an inner state.” She refers to this as the uncanny grotesque. The uncanny, to an extent, functions as a description of how the body becomes an avatar of sorts, for the communication of internal facets of individual psychology where internal disorders play out in physical sense. While Russo differentiates between the carnival and the uncanny grotesque, both categories function similarly to express difference and social defiance. For Russo, associations of the grotesque with feminine archetypes such as the whore and temptress, can all too easily be perceived as defaulting to misogynistic female stereotypes. Conversely, the very act of flaunting sexual and gender limitations frames the intersection of female grotesque activity and the debauched as a form of challenge to the natural order.

Notably, Fleabag is making a spectacle of herself through humour. Building on concepts of the female grotesque, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn identifies, in the context of media culture, spectacle as encapsulating the unruly woman defined through her defiant laughter at herself but also back to the world; in other world, the female comedian. The harnessing of intelligent humour makes such a woman “vulnerable to ridicule and trivialization — but also (...) vaguely demonic or threatening”; in this regard the unruly woman becomes the subject less object of laughter. The unruly woman does not fit the limiting character types that cinema and television established for women, but might also lean into them as part of the strategy of subversion. The woman of humoured spectacle according to Karlyn, “must be willing to offend and to be offensive, to look beyond the doomed suffering women of melodrama and the evil ones of film noir.” It is the inversion of laughter at marginalised notions of physically and socially abjected femininity that makes visible, through the equally disarming and piercing elements of wit, the qualities and position of womanhood as excluded from the domain of hegemonic power and privilege.

Fleabag’s knowing and cognisant approach to her own feminine grotesqueness means she purposefully plays into such abject inversions. Specifically, via this form of black humour, Fleabag plays out behaviours and attitudes habitually enacted by men. She pervs on other men while gaslighting her caring, doting boyfriend Harry. This includes gleefully revealing the game she puts him through of pretending to want to break up with him when the house needs a once over, to put him into an emotionally induced cleaning frenzy. In S01E01, after being caught masturbating to a video of Obama, Harry once again threatens to leave her and begs her not to be put through her seduce-him-back-again routine:
HARRY. Please don’t say anything. And please don’t stop me leaving. Please don’t.
FLEABAG. Ok.
HARRY. Look, I’ve really tried to be there for you through this. You can’t say I haven’t tried. Don’t say anything. And please don’t contact me or turn up at my house drunk in your underwear. It won’t work this time.
FLEABAG. (To the camera) It will.

Fleabag’s sex-selfishness and casual kleptomania is demonstrated well in another scene from S01E01. On a date at the pub, Fleabag opportunistically steals money from her date’s wallet before storming out because he won’t go home to sleep with her. At the bus stop, she sees a drunk woman slump over who accidentally reveals a breast. Fleabag goes to her aid by adjusting her top and sitting with her. In return, the woman drunkenly mumbles “you are such a lovely man.” After helping her up to get in a cab, Fleabag takes advantage of the situation:
FLEABAG. Do you want to come home with me?
WOMAN. What?! No way, you naughty boy!

A seemingly innocent interaction operates as a reversing of the reality of ambivalent sexism. The scene points specifically to how male chivalry is only ever conditional and always potentially dangerous for women. In this scene, Fleabag enacts a form of predatory behaviour normatively associated with men, but also displays an albeit failed attempt at sexual allurement. In the moment, her neediness and focus on her own wants and desires eclipse those of the woman.

The scenes discussed here display how Fleabag plays out an oddly emancipating version of the uncanny female grotesque by creating space for the display of unruly activity in women. Her openness and humour harnesses the abject as a cathartic exercise, precisely through the lens of the subversive feminine. In addition to the examples noted above, it is rare to see for instance a miscarriage displayed on TV, as is the case in the first episode of season two where Claire miscarries in the toilet. Kristeva explains that the “embarrassment, shame and guilt” associations with the body arise when the mother/infant maternal authority — where what is proper or improper has not yet been established — is replaced by the socially and culturally constructed paternal laws of the symbolic order. Fleabag leans into an array of abject topics that remain regressively culturally reinforced, taboo, as well as those that are equally perversely fascinating, indeed darkly humorous, as they are a trigger for revulsion.

A tweet summarises the general opinion of the French audience who had previously watched Fleabag when the French remake came out: “On aime Camille Cottin. MAIS… Camille Cottin n’est pas Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Jeanne Herry n’est pas Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Paris n’est pas Londres. #Mouche n’est pas #Fleabag.” On Allociné, a recurring criticism concerned the fact that the public did not recognise the style of Cottin in the character of Mouche: “On ne reconnaît pas le style de Camille Cottin”, “Camille Cottin qui incarne [Mouche] est repoussante — à tous égards”, and “J’en attendais tout de même mieux de Camille Cottin car c’est tout de même pour elle que j’avais regardé. J’adore son style de base comme ce qu’elle nous a montré dans CONNASSE. Seulement ici, elle peine à avoir le même entrain.”

Because of the conflation between Cottin’s on and off-screen personae, the audience identify Cottin as a transgressive Parisienne. The expectation to see the actor embodying once more a character representative of contemporary French femininity, strong and assertive, is derided through the effectively abject and grotesque dimension of the part. To put it bluntly, she is not charmingly bold, she is of poor taste; she is
somewhat repulsive. This incompatibility between the star persona and the character can be particularly felt by the audience in a number of scenes as early as in the first episode of *Mouche*. For instance, watching Cottin having anal sex in the opening scene and wondering to herself (and us the viewer) about the size of her anus (see Fig.5); raving over the fact that her sister defecated in a sink (see Fig.6); and claiming that she has hairy nipples (see Fig.7) are inevitably clashing with the *Parisienne* cinematographic type as defined by Chaplin, and that fits Cottin’s star persona so effectively. Essentially, the sophistication Cottin gained through her characters played in TV series thus far does not align with that of Fleabag’s grittier abjection. A celebrity feminist activist and Chanel muse may stand out, speak up and be a rule breaker, but she maintains a level of decorum; one that differs from the darkly irreverent display of millennial angst, self-sabotaging dry hilarity and apathy of Waller-Bridge’s Fleabag.

Fig. 5: Fleabag (left) and Mouche (right) reflecting after anal sex scene.

![Fig. 5: Fleabag (left) and Mouche (right) reflecting after anal sex scene.](image)

Fig. 6: Fleabag (left) and Mouche (right) speaking about defecation.

![Fig. 6: Fleabag (left) and Mouche (right) speaking about defecation.](image)

Fig. 7: Fleabag (left) and Mouche (right) commenting about their “hairy nipples”.

![Fig. 7: Fleabag (left) and Mouche (right) commenting about their “hairy nipples”.](image)
4. The problem of the breaking of the fourth wall

The clash between Cottin’s star persona and audience’s expectation in Mouche is even more reinforced by the clear display of Fleabag/Mouche’s breaking of the fourth wall throughout the series. While the practice was originally associated with theatre, the Brechtian coming out of character to address the audience, it has since developed in cinema and television. Herein, the hermetically closed world of the play, film or TV show to which the audience is privy without the actor’s knowledge (which formulates the invisible wall and hence suspension of disbelief) is broken. The previously invisible audiences become acknowledged by the diegetic characters when the actors reach out to speak directly to them. In breaking the fourth wall, the actor either momentarily halts the fictional flow of the storyline to express their thoughts, acknowledging they are in a film/show and venting to the camera. Unlike the mockumentary series made popular by The Office for instance, films or TV series that break the fourth wall often shift in and out of the different modes. As soon as the moment passes, the clear distinction between the diegetic and extradiegetic is restored, but the style is more personalised and intimate, making the audience feel closer to the characters who broke the fourth wall. In his discussion on the breaking of the fourth wall in cinema, although somewhat distinct to television, Tom Brown for example states that while the method can destabilise illusion, hence distancing audiences from the fiction, it can also have the opposite effect. “Direct address” can in fact be said to “intensify our relationship with fiction.” Further to this, the almost romanticised audience connectivity produced via the returned gaze, the experience “of looking into another’s eyes: the search for another’s subjectivity” can be seen to mercurially precipitate our relationship with the character, as distinct to the actor.

Fleabag’s camera asides, glances and darkly humorous retorts are added to by highly confessional insights. At points, the viewers feel like she is not just talking to them, but they are privy to her own inner monologue complete with highly private fears and desires. The effect created by this intimate breaking of the fourth wall is analogous to people’s recent use of social media to form distinctly personal connections with audiences/followers. Fleabag relies on a form of metacommunication, similar to confessional expressions via social media. It is not just what she is saying to us, but how it is said that provides additional meaning and intent. Such communication ranges from expressions of sarcasm to saying one thing only to reveal the opposite to be true. This manifests in not only Fleabag’s comments to the viewers, but facial expressions to the camera in the form of the ironic side glance and eye roll, the smug eyebrow raise or the cocky look back (see Fig. 8, 9 and 10). These moments of complicity with the audience align with how social media selfies and videos, accompanied by personal comments, work to construct an artificially induced world of confessional connectivity, one that is almost conversational.
It could be argued that the personalised quality of Fleabag, is a source of spectatorial jouissance because it makes the audience relate to the character of Fleabag more than they do to the actor, Phoebe Waller-Bridge. The rise of the internet and social media has introduced an unparalleled level of personalised access to microcelebrity (self-made) and celebrity (actors and singers for instance) influencers and their “inner worlds”. The fact that much crafting of the spectacle of the self by many social media stars is often a highly formulated version of “authenticity”, is beside the point. The phenomenon of social media means that the veil of distance has been metaphorically removed, providing everyday people with the ability to interface with celebrities in such a way that was previously not possible. Although the psychological relationship to media personalities as “friends” has been theorised for decades now through the theory of “parasocial” interaction, it is extended even further in the context of social media. This is in and of itself a condition that is not fully replicated in our everyday “viewings” of celebrities, for instance seeing them in a film, TV show or in a magazine or the tabloids.
In her research on the topic, Crystal Abidin explains the slight difference between microcelebrity and celebrity influencers is their level of relatability: “Although celebrity is traditionally thought of as an innate quality gifted to extraordinary people, contemporary celebrity culture has shifted to focus on people [...] constructed through process.” This process is the mechanics of social media or reality TV, for example, which can make someone popular as much as celebrity agents and promoters can help make people of innate talent famous. Abidin goes on to suggest that perhaps what further differs between the two, is that self-made influencers/reality TV stars seem to cultivate an extra layer of believability to their story of self — hence the more enhanced parasocial bond built through trust, self-disclosure and believability. As Waller-Bridge was relatively unknown to audiences when Fleabag was aired (although she has gained significant popularity since), audiences first and foremost got to know the character of Fleabag, over Waller-Bridge. In this regard, Fleabag stands in for who the audience find points of connectivity and relatability with. However, in the case of the French remake, the audience first sees Cottin, and more specifically her star persona, not Mouche.

While theories of the gaze acknowledge more fluid gendered subjectivities of spectatorship, the creation of media culture by women with a female audience in mind, distinctly places Fleabag in a category of contemporary media (from television to social media) increasingly catering to the female gaze, via female humour. Evolving from Laura Mulvey’s influential feminist film theory addressing twentieth century cinema and the omnipresence of one-dimensional storylines of womanhood that privilege heterosexual male viewership, the female gaze can be understood as the way the female experience is more holistically addressed and represented. The storylines that are portrayed in Fleabag and Mouche are subversive, entertaining and relatable for female viewers to a point. Audience identification with the character Mouche is harder to achieve in such a way that brings spectatorial jouissance, precisely because of the lingering spectre of Cottin’s celebrity status and star persona. The personalised direct address to camera in Mouche means the original audience’s attachment to the real life Cottin and the particular Parisian femininity she stands for, becomes muddied by the introduction of an almost alternate aberrant version of herself. The female subject of Manet’s Olympia certainly encounters the viewer, in a sense breaking the fourth wall as she assertively reaches out to engage with the audience through her reverse gaze. This is a boldness which in turn lives on in Cottin’s contemporary persona. The female construction of imagery by and for women through the platform of social media, reality TV or the confessional stance of Mouche essentially presents an even more raw and assertive returned female gaze. Because of how viewers reflect themselves in the woman they are viewing, it also becomes a looped gaze. Cottin/Mouche, however, become entangled and the viewer is complexly forced to choose with whom they wish to identify — the flawed romanticism of Mouche or the unconvincing Cottin.

Conclusion

It is late at night and Fleabag is sitting alone at a bus stop. After realising that her bus has been cancelled, she stands up and starts to walk away from the camera. The camera moves and follows her, and as it does she stops to look back. She smiles at us, the audience, shakes her head as in “no, it ends here”, turns and continues to walk away.
The camera lingers though, as we watch Fleabag walk down an empty and dimly lit street. She turns to us once more, shyly waves goodbye before walking off into the night. It is fitting that the last scene of the last episode of Fleabag sees the show's namesake break the fourth wall and engage directly with the viewer, but in doing so, putting an end to the close relationship she had established with us over two seasons. Mouche did not get this chance since the remake was not renewed for a second and final season.

This article has mapped the rise of Camille Cottin to a celebrity of international recognition, and the way in which her roles in television series have shaped her star persona. Coming to prominence with the prank series Connasse in 2013, Cottin then chose roles that derive from and provide a different kind of agency to the cinematographic type of the Parisienne. In doing so, Camille Cottin succeeded in shaping her star image as an “insolent Parisienne” and projecting a new and transgressive portrayal of French femininity on TV screens. However, her taking of the part of Mouche in the French remake of the Fleabag series constitutes a rupture in the continuity of the characters Cottin has played on television thus far, escaping the expectations of the French audience. We have argued that this clash was specifically due to the abject and grotesque nature of the original Fleabag character who, we have shown, stands for a darkly irreverent display of millennial apathy. The mercurial quality of stardom, therefore, is one that can either be re-enforced or dispelled through the screen; making celebrity an imprint on an actor that even the divide of reality and fiction cannot shake.

It may be argued that the nature of this remake, far from being an adaptation, contributes to the fact that Cottin, as Mouche, embodies a female subjectivity that escapes inscription in the French cultural imagination. Unlike other recent adaptations, such as the recent En thérapie (Arte, 2021) that is based on the concept of the original Israeli show BeTipul (Hot 3, 2005-2008) but rewritten and anchored in the context of the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris, Mouche recreates Fleabag almost scene for scene. Indeed, the show barely seeks to reinscribe the plot into French or even Parisian culture, which makes it difficult for the audience to relate to the show. This aside, we have identified that it is because of the breaking of the fourth wall, in combination with her Parisienne iconographical profile, that the relationship between Cottin’s on-screen persona and the audience does not ring true. Would the French remake of Fleabag have been more successful if the main character had been interpreted by a previously unknown actor, just like Phoebe Waller-Bridge at the time Fleabag aired for the first time in 2016? Cottin seems to be slowly shifting away from the French star system since, after obtaining a minor part in Robert Zemeckis’s Allied in 2016, she will soon be seen in two upcoming Hollywood productions: Tom McCarthy’s Stillwater (2021) and Ridley Scott’s House of Gucci (2021) co-starring with Lady Gaga and Al Pacino.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. *Fleabag* is based on Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s first play of the same name. The play premiered at the 2013 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and was performed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge herself. It then transferred to Soho Theatre, London, for several successful runs, followed by a UK tour. The play won a Fringe First Award, the Most Promising New Playwright and Best Female Performance at
the Off West End Theatre Awards, The Stage Award for Best Solo Performer and the Critics’ Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright.

2. Mouche was not rated by Rotten Tomatoes at all. This may be explained by the fact that Rotten Tomatoes rates and reviews mainly English-language content.

3. “Vulgarity pushed to its extreme, I think we could even talk about dullness”; “What a disappointment... it’s vulgar, without rhythm, caricatured, the cast is promising but in the end it’s worthless” and “I didn’t know fleabag [sic] before I watched this remake. To me, everything seemed to sound odd, nothing works. When nearly a year later I watched fleabag [sic], I was stunned to see how great, funny, impertinent, and moving the original series is.”

(All translations are our own, unless stated). https://www.allocine.fr/series/ficheserie-24495/ critiques/star-1/, consulted December 29th, 2021.

4. “It seems that comedy cannot be transposed that easily from one country to another: humorous touches often fall flat because the series lacks a reincarnation of the “so British” feel in a French context [...] Phoebe Waller-Bridges’ coarse diatribes, so pleasing in the language of Shakespeare, are often awkward in that of Molière, even completely out of place, and they are often presented with a lack of kookiness, and the dull soundtrack often clashes with the mood of the scene.” Julia Fernandez and Maximilien Pierrette, ‘Mouche : que vaut la série avec Camille Cottin, remake de la comédie britannique Fleabag’ https://www.allocine.fr/article/ fichearticle_gen_carticle=18681776.html, consulted December 29th, 2021.

5. This study relies specifically on the reception of Mouche by the French public since the series did not reach an international audience.


9. A quintessential example of this is the character of Gaby (Mireille Balin) in Pépé le Moko (1937): an elegant demimondaine from Paris who is supported by a rich businessman and aspires to escape her working-class origins. To a certain extent, the character of Gaby as a Parisienne reaches back to nineteenth century literary and visual references such as Zola’s character of Nana from L’Assommoir (1877) and subsequently Nana (1880), painted by Manet in 1877, and other Salon paintings representing demimondaines or Grandes Horizontales. Felicity Chaplin, La Parisienne in Cinema: Between Art and Life, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 15.

10. A name that only reinforced the conflation between Camille Cottin’s persona and the character of the “Connasse”.


12. “Taxi! Winegrowers! Do you know where I can find a taxi? I have to go back to Paris urgently, I’m not feeling well!”

13. “I absolutely don’t have the life I deserve, and I never ever want to work again."


17. It is worth noting that the character of the “Connasse” also draws on the misogynistic stereotype of the Parisian grande bourgeoisie, which is core to Cottin’s success in this role. See also Lindsey Tramuta, The New Parisienne: The Women & Ideas Shaping Paris, ABRAMS, 2020.


23. Chaplin, p. 150.


25. “There was Connasse [The Parisian Bitch] and I was told Andréa in Dix pour Cent, another bitch! In Larguées, Rose, another bitch! And now, Mouche... but the comparison doesn’t work at all levels.” https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/24/france-fleabag-mouche-phoebe-wall-er-bridge, consulted February 16th, 2021.


27. “I realise I haven’t lived up to this daycare centre’s philosophy, which I find admirable, and which I support 100,000%. Yes. I was selfish and manipulating, sly... boorish... spineless? I’ve been a horrible person.” Translation from Netflix subtitles.


29. Ibid.


31. “It’s true that before these two films, I was taken on for my head-on personality [...]. Roles with a certain form of violence or, in any case, very assertive. I’m very happy to come up with something different.” https://madame.lefigaro.fr/celebrites/camille-cottin-face-cache-sensible-rencontre-film-les-eblois-311019-167781, consulted February 11th, 2021.

32. “She is in me, it’s something animal, like an urge.” Ibid.

33. « Tu sais Papa, il faut arrêter de m’appeler “dragon”. Moi, je fais des cauchemars en ce moment où j’ai des bras qui poussent de partout et au bout il y a des griffes et tout ce que je touche je le lacère. Et quand je parle, il y a comme une sorte de jus maronnasse qui sort de ma bouche » (“You know dad, you must stop calling me ‘dragon’. I have nightmares at the moment in which I have arms growing out from everywhere at the end of which there are claws and I slash everything I touch. And when I speak, a sort of brownish juice comes out of my mouth”).

34. “Get her out of this body!”

35. “It’s true that I’m often offered roles of strong women who are not afraid to say what they think, who are comfortable with gender equality and who don’t place themselves as objects of desire... Which not necessarily who I am all the time! Let’s say that this reflects who I would like to be. Today, people want to see female characters who take charge, who are going forward.” https://www.elle.fr/Loisirs/Cinema/Dossiers/Camille-Cottin-A-18-ans-a-la-place-d-un-nouveaunez-j-ai-demande-une-moto-3781338, consulted February 11th, 2021.


37. “After the success of the series [Connasse], and then the film, I only had to invent the rest. And convince that I wasn’t exactly just a b...” https://madame.lefigaro.fr/celebrites/camille-cottinla-
41. “I’m sorry, I don’t know my own strength.”
42. “It’s OK, he’ll catch up on his scooter.”
43. “The Parisienne type, associated with consumer culture since the nineteenth century has been used extensively in advertising campaigns, and even appeared as the mascot for the Paris World’s Fair in 1900.” Chaplin, p. 176.
48. “She’s the embodiment of the woman of the 2020s. She has contributed something very modern thanks to her boldness and her physique. She has a kind of beauty that amazes and, at the same time, to which one can identify” https://madame.lefigaro.fr/celebrites/camille-cottin-face-cachee-sensible-rencontre-film-les-ebelouis-311019-167781, consulted February 11th, 2021.
52. Irwin, p. 7.
53. Irwin, p. 7.
54. The view that women do not conform to order and reason has existed since classical antiquity. Aristotle, for instance, claimed that because woman is of ‘the flesh’; she has no association with the activity of mind. In early medieval Christian writing, male authors’ perception of woman as different to the ‘normative male’ saw this outlook formalised. Any challenge to ‘order, rationality, and “reality” as socially represented’, particularly associated with masculinity, similarly became connected to evil and wickedness. Margaret Miles, ‘Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque’, in The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections, eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, Michigan and Cambridge, William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1997, p. 92.
55. Ibid., p. 85.
56. Miles, p. 95.


59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.


62. Ibid.

63. It is in season two, that Fleabag takes the metaphor of profaning the sacred to a new level, with making real her carnal desires towards the Hot Priest. Again, she enacts all that is feared of women and assumed of them. When it is played out, however, the impact is even more shocking. Because the character also annotates to the audience her transgressions, she is somewhat gleeful in conveying her uncanny grotesque impetuses.

64. Russo, p. 12.


66. Ibid, p. 15.

67. The character of Fleabag's sexually inappropriate brother-in-law, Martin, works to highlight the double standards to which women and men are often held. Martin constantly jumps on any chance to make some sexually explicit — not even innuendo — but graphically inappropriate statements. “You could tell him you were going to pop to the loo and he would shout ‘Yes, you pop to the loo then pull down your knickers then I will come in and fuck you.’” [S01E03]. As with much sexist commentary, it is too easily excused away as just being a joke. As Fleabag states to the audience, you cannot take offence because “he will make you feel bad as he was ‘just being fun.’” [S01E03]. The rage displayed in S01E4 by the men at the Retreat is further indicative of the simmering, innate misogyny and sexism held by some men.

68. Kristeva, p. 3.

69. “We love Camille Cottin. BUT... Camille Cottin is not Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Jeanne Herry is not Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Paris is not London. #Mouche is not # Fleabag.” Tweet from @J_M_Renault, June 4th, 2019.

70. “We can’t recognize Camille Cottin’s style”, “Camille Cottin, who plays Mouche is repulsive — in every way” and “I was expecting better from Camille Cottin because it’s for her that I watched the show. I love her style, with what she showed in Connasse. But here, she struggles to show the same energy.” https://www.allocine.fr/series/ficheserie-24495/critiques/, consulted July 30th, 2021.


72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.


75. Ibid.

76. Waller-Bridge did star in, created and wrote the 2016 Channel 4 comedy series *Crashing*, but it came out the same year. Arguably, the possible autobiographical dimension of *Fleabag* (and *Crashing*) is also an element missing in the French remake, which stars Camille Cottin but was created by Jeanne Herry, and these despite Cottin’s effort to claim how much she relates to Fleabag in the French media.

Concerning relatability, residual concepts of class and the influence of religion is still very much alive in the UK. Although Protestantism is the dominant religion in the UK, notions of guilt, including in Catholicism, are explored to certain degrees in the *Fleabag* storyline. *Fleabag* flaunts her indiscretions, but feels guilt for them also. In the second season, this is more literally portrayed in her clear awareness of her boundary crossing as she falls for the Hot (Catholic) Priest. Although the main religion in France is Catholicism, France’s history of separation of church and state, combined with a more secular attitude and challenge to notions of class, means that the nuanced complexities of guilt and improper behaviour for a certain class type are perhaps more relatable in *Fleabag*’s situation, but do not translate as well to that of *Mouche*’s.

Even the scene from S01E01 where Mouche is seen masturbating to Benoît Hamon (former French Socialist party presidential candidate), whereas in the original show *Fleabag* masturbates to Barack Obama, seems odd. It is a failed attempt at placing the character in the French context.


ABSTRACTS

This article discusses Camille Cottin’s star image, considering more specifically what was at stake in her 2019 performance in *Mouche*, the French remake of British tragicomedy TV series *Fleabag* created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. The framework of this remake and the transposition of Cottin in the character played by Waller-Bridge offers a discussion on the representation of female sexuality and gender through the main character of Mouche and Fleabag. It argues that the nexus of Cottin’s gendered stardom both meets and transgresses the ideals of the cinematic type of the *Parisienne*, which may lead to think that Cottin was the perfect fit to be the French version of Fleabag. However, as Mouche, her persona gestures toward the projection of a female subjectivity that escapes inscription into the French cultural imagination and social practices. Drawing from theories of the abject and the female grotesque as a subversive strategy to challenge gendered expectations in *Fleabag*, this article sheds light on how effectively this is transposed to Cottin’s version of the character. It also considers how the strategy of breaking the fourth wall, which creates a personalised connection with the character of Fleabag, mimics the personalised and intimate connection to celebrities that social media now offers. The article suggests that Cottin’s on-screen persona competes with her star image, threatening to eradicate the space of spectatorial jouissance necessary for the processes of cinematic identification and intimate connection.

Cet article se penche sur la *persona* de Camille Cottin, en s’intéressant notamment aux enjeux de sa performance dans *Mouche* (2019), le remake français de la série tragi-comique britannique *Fleabag*, créée par Phoebe Waller Bridge. Une comparaison entre les deux séries nous permet notamment d’explorer les représentations de genre qu’elles véhiculent. Le fait que l’image de Camille Cottin corresponde au type de la Parisienne tout en le transgressant laisse penser qu’elle est l’actrice parfaite pour incarner la version française du personnage de Fleabag. Cependant, en tant que Mouche, la star tend vers une féminité en décalage avec le contexte et l’imaginaire culturels français. Après avoir montré comment *Fleabag* utilise l’abject et le grotesque féminins pour subvertir les attentes générées, l’article met en lumière les limites de la transposition de cette stratégie subversive au personnage incarné par Cottin. Enfin, il examine comment la
rupture du quatrième mur – qui, en imitant le rapport intime avec les célébrités qu’offrent aujourd’hui les réseaux sociaux, crée un lien personnalisé entre le public et le personnage de Fleabag – pour suggérer que le personnage joué par Cottin rivalise ici avec son image de star, menaçant d’éradiquer l’espace de jouissance spectatorielle nécessaire au processus d’identification.

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**Keywords:** Cottin Camille, Fleabag, Waller-Bridge Phoebe, femininity, stardom, abject, female grotesque, fourth wall

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