



Emily Saidel

Fleabag, *Jane the Virgin*, and Feminist Media on Television's Textual Edges

Film and television accolades traditionally elicit praise for those found deserving, empathy for those who missed out, and scorn for the selection process no matter the results. The year 2020 was no exception. The announcement of the Golden Globe film nominees prompted headlines including “If there’s a theme to the 2020 Golden Globe nominations, it’s ‘all men, all the time’ (McNamara) and “The Golden Globes didn’t nominate any women for best director. Or screenplay. Or motion picture” (Rao). However, the smaller screen Globe nominations told a different story. Of the ten Best Television Series nominees, six featured women-centric stories—*Big Little Lies* (2017-), *The Crown* (2016-), *Killing Eve* (2018-), *The Morning Show* (2019-), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-), and *Fleabag* (2016-2019). The eponymous titling of these series highlights the centrality of female characters to their respective stories; *Eve*, *Mrs. Maisel*, and *Fleabag* invoke their leads, while *The Crown* metonymically refers to Queen Elizabeth II. Building from that titular recognition, this paper argues that the potential for feminist media-

making extends beyond the visual paradigm of spectacle and spectatorship into the (para) textual. Analyzing the award-winning *Fleabag*’s humorous and descriptive end credits alongside *Jane the Virgin*’s (2014-2019)¹ manipulation of its title card reveals feminist possibilities within seemingly inconsequential industrially-codified spaces. In addition to a politics of representation, these two shows invite a feminist onomastic; how women name themselves and how they name others. Simultaneously, the ephemerality of these spaces demonstrates the continuing challenge of formulating feminist critique within a hegemonic industry.

Fleabag, a co-production by Two Brothers Pictures for BBC with Amazon Studios,² adapted from a stage play of the same name, is a twelve-

1. A 2015 Golden Globe nominee for Best Television Series – Musical or Comedy.

2. *Fleabag* was produced for the BBC in two sets of episodes. To standardize terminology, these will be referred to with the US style as ‘season one’ and ‘season two,’ rather than the UK style of ‘series one’ and ‘series two.’ In this article ‘series’ refers to the entire run of a program.

episode, raunchy, bittersweet half-hour comedy created by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge. The series tracks the unnamed protagonist's attempts to cope with painful elements of her past including the deaths of her mother and best friend. Prior to the Globe nomination and win, *Fleabag* had already received Program of the Year at the Television Critics Association and Outstanding Comedy Series at the Primetime Emmy Awards for its 2019 second season as well as awards for multiple members of the cast and crew. *Fleabag*'s women-centric storytelling does not rest solely on casting female leads. Hilarie Ashton, writing for *Ms.* magazine, explains "*Fleabag* lets the near-constant absurdity of women's experiences within a male-controlled world open out into a refreshing slant of realistic, female-centered and implicitly feminist viewpoint" (2019). Throughout the series, Waller-Bridge's character reveals an awareness of the camera; asides, conspiratorial smiles, and significant glances acknowledge the viewing audience and provide the character an opportunity to make her thought processes explicit. One example of this occurs during the second season when she brashly reports to a counsellor why she thinks her father gifted her a therapy session. "Because my mother died, and he can't talk about it. And my sister and I didn't speak for a year because she thinks I tried to sleep with her husband, and because I spent most of my adult life using sex to deflect from the screaming void inside my empty heart." She then turns directly to the camera and remarks, "I'm good at this." This fourth-wall breaking technique contributes to what Ashton, after Mulvey, calls a female gaze that is "a nuanced showcase of feminism" (2019).

Jane the Virgin, a loose adaptation of the Venezuelan telenovela *Juana La Virgen* (2002), ran for one hundred episodes and five seasons during a period of demographic transition for the CW network (Poggi). *Jane* shares with *Fleabag* a direct address to the camera through a voice-over narrator who summarizes past events, provides backstory, and adds commentary. This narrator, a male voice revealed at the conclusion to the series to belong to a grown-up version of Jane's son Mateo, repeatedly aligns himself with the audience by calling them "friends" and referring to "our Jane." The story he tells is a feminist showcase of three

generations of women in the Villanueva family navigating the challenges in their lives: from more mundane career-related angst to the painful anxieties of an undocumented immigration status and a cancer diagnosis to the absurd machinations of a criminal mastermind. *Jane* has been praised as a "critical darling" (Bentley) and for confronting the stereotype of the hypersexualized Latina, and in this show "viewers were privy to a complicated feminist attempting to separate her beliefs from those of her grandmother's, unlearn patriarchal mores and reconcile being a woman of faith who could actually find pleasure in sex" (Aviles).³ Taken together, these two television programs fulfill a feminist politics of diverse representation and pleasure emphasized by early feminist film studies. However, it is not solely the camera's gaze or direct address that captures the interiority of these complex, contemporary women. Through their paratexts, each program positions the audience to not only watch the story, but also to occupy the viewpoint of the main character.

In his seminal *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette argues that book titles have a designating function, to name "as precisely as possible and without too much risk of confusion" (79). He proposes two non-mutually exclusive categories for types of titles: the thematic, referring to the subject matter, and the rhematic, referring to the commentary on the topic. In Jonathan Gray's application of Genette's theories to visual and time-based media, he emphasizes that paratexts are not only entryway thresholds, but can be encountered during and after experiencing the text, in media res (23). The serialized nature of television shows presents a distinctive challenge in distinguishing the bounds of a 'text' to which a paratext refers. This is because the unit of analysis—the episode, the season, the full series—dictates different conclusions. Unlike

3. See also Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. *Latinas and Latinos on TV: Colorblind Comedy in the Post-racial Network Era*. The University of Arizona Press, 2018; Pino, Ivana. "How 'Jane the Virgin' Defies Negative Stereotypes About Latinas." *Latin Live*, wearelatinlive.com/article/8678/how-jane-the-virgin-defies-negative-stereotypes-about-latina; and Zeilinger, Julie. "6 Ways 'Jane the Virgin' Is Destroying Latino Stereotypes." *Mic*, 18 February 2015, mic.com/articles/110768/6-ways-jane-the-virgin-is-destroying-latino-stereotypes

books, physical objects with front and back covers, television shows and other moving-picture media are objects in time whose internal and external edges are less clearly delineated. Titles may not appear on screen at the very beginning of a narrative, and end credits may not signal the end of narrative content. Whereas other paratexts such as promotional material or reviews are temporally and spatially distinct from the texts, title sequences and end credits are doubly liminal: boundary markers coded as part of the show but apart from the diegesis.

Gray concludes that opening credit sequences work to introduce new audiences “to the characters, genre, themes, relationships, and general subject matter” (73) and “to police certain reading strategies” (23). Gray, in his focus on promotional campaign materials, toys, spin-offs, and mashups, does not address the role of the title itself as distinct from the title sequence. End credits go unexplored, presumably under the assumption of mere legal necessity. In these brief textual structures, the encoding of meaning by producers and the decoding by audiences more easily align (Hall 131, van Zoonen 8). This facilitates not only a preferred reading but also, in *Jane the Virgin* and *Fleabag*, grounds an inhabitable feminist subjectivity.

Unlike prestige television shows that proclaim their narrative and thematic depth with abstract or symbolic title sequences, *Jane the Virgin* uses a simple title card. The screen freezes and “JANE THE VIRGIN” in white text appears on top of the action (Figure 1).⁴ In “Chapter Forty-Seven,” the episode during which Jane consummates her marriage, a cold-open full of sexual double entendres leads to a title card ending in a question mark (Figure 2). In the following episode, the show acknowledges the inaccuracy of the show’s title by having the standard title card, JANE THE VIRGIN, appear. Then a thicker white line strikes out THE VIRGIN (Figure 3). Subsequent episodes use the same animated strikethrough and add alternative descriptors such as THE



Figure 1

SUPER STRESSED MOTHER-WIFE-WRITER (“Chapter Fifty-Three”), THE WIDOW (“Chapter Fifty-Five”), THE FAILURE (“Chapter Seventy-Three”), and THE GOODBYE (“Chapter One Hundred”) (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7). Each adjustment to the title captures the facet of Jane’s life most prominently featured in that week’s episode. *Jane’s* creator and executive producer Jennie Snyder Urman describes these flexible titles as a way “of identifying [that] people are so much more than sex. So, this is a person with so many different identities and so many things that make her character an interesting person. Once we get rid of the virgin thing, we can just open it up to other things that define her” (Nguyen). Here, Urman articulates how the show explores the multiple, and at times competing, subjectivities Jane embodies. While many programs have used variable visuals in the title sequences, from the weekly, animated gags of *The Simpsons* (1989-) to the different map locations of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), few have done so through manipulation of the title of the show itself.⁵

Poststructuralist feminist theory argues that the individual subject is always heterogeneous, rather than singular or unitary. “A person’s subjectivity can thus be described in terms of the multiplicity of social positions taken up by the person in question...in this sense, a female person cannot be presumed to have a pregiven and fixed gender identity as a woman” (Ang 119). Through this quirky paratextual device, *Jane* succinctly captures and makes explicit the multiple subject positions required for Jane to inhabit modern life.

4. A few episodes in the first half of the series add to the title card such as the insertion of “disgusting” (Chapter Twenty-Four) or “married” (Chapter Forty-Six) whereas in the second half of the series “virgin” is crossed out and replaced every episode.

5. *Cougar Town* (2009-2015), a sitcom that aired first on ABC, then on TBS, used different on-screen text each week to mock the show’s indelicate and largely inaccurate title, but without altering the show’s title.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

By overwriting the original subjectivity, which reduced her identity to sexual experience, Jane's multiplicity and complexity come more firmly into focus. Jane is a daughter, mother, wife, friend. She is a waitress, teacher, student, author. She is a bilingual, second-generation Latina, living in Florida. Her relationships, her career, and her sense-of-self all fluctuate throughout the series and, once the anchor of 'virgin' is expunged, the show's title fluctuates along with her.

The piecemeal nature of television narratives further highlights this fragmented subjectivity. Just as Jane is split among the roles she fulfills, *Jane* is split into episodes and seasons. Unlike series produced by digital-native distributors such as Netflix and Amazon with entire seasons released simultaneously, *Jane the Virgin* followed the more traditional route of a single episode broadcast

weekly, with the first four seasons airing on a fall-to-spring schedule. Although the show uses the affectation of "chapter" in naming each episode, a nod to Jane's writerly aspirations, the incremental release of these chapters undermines the parallel of television show as novel. However, even as Jane's sense of identity evolves, *Jane's* industrial identity is recognized by critics, fans, broadcast schedules, and awards, as a single, continuous television show. Despite the prominence of changeable, episodic subjectivities, the constancy of *Jane the Virgin* also attributes constancy to Jane. Within the paratextual arena of the title card, Jane maintains a fragmented subjectivity and a unified subjectivity simultaneously.

Jane the Virgin ascribes an abundance of identities to its protagonist; *Fleabag* does the opposite. Although the script indicates dialogue

spoken by ‘Fleabag,’ the main character goes unnamed throughout the series (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag: The Scriptures*). The show’s paratext, in this case the closing credits, reinforces that missing nomenclature with the credits listing, “Written by and starring PHOEBE WALLER-BRIDGE” and no character mentioned (Figure 8). In order to reference the character, reviewers and audience members alike have taken to calling her ‘Fleabag,’ and Waller-Bridge has confirmed this nickname in interviews about the series (O’Keefe). “I liked the idea of withholding some of that mystery,” the British actress says, explaining that “Fleabag” is based on her real-life nickname. “That word, ‘fleabag,’ that felt right, because there’s a messy connotation to it.” (Desta). For ease of reference,

boyfriend had sex with someone else. Fleabag constantly feels inferior to her professionally successful and self-contained sister, Claire. For much of the series, Fleabag minimizes her self-worth with ironic detachment, emphasizing her unlikability. In the final episode of the second season, just before his wedding ceremony, Fleabag’s father has gotten his foot stuck in the floor of the attic. Fleabag finds him, and before returning to the ceremony, they have a heart-to-heart. He tells her, “I know she’s [Godmother] not... everyone’s cup of tea. But neither are you, darling. I mean, I’m sorry. I love you, but I’m not sure that I like you all the time.” With only ‘fleabag’ to name the character, the audience also participates in Fleabag’s unlikability, denigrating her messiness.

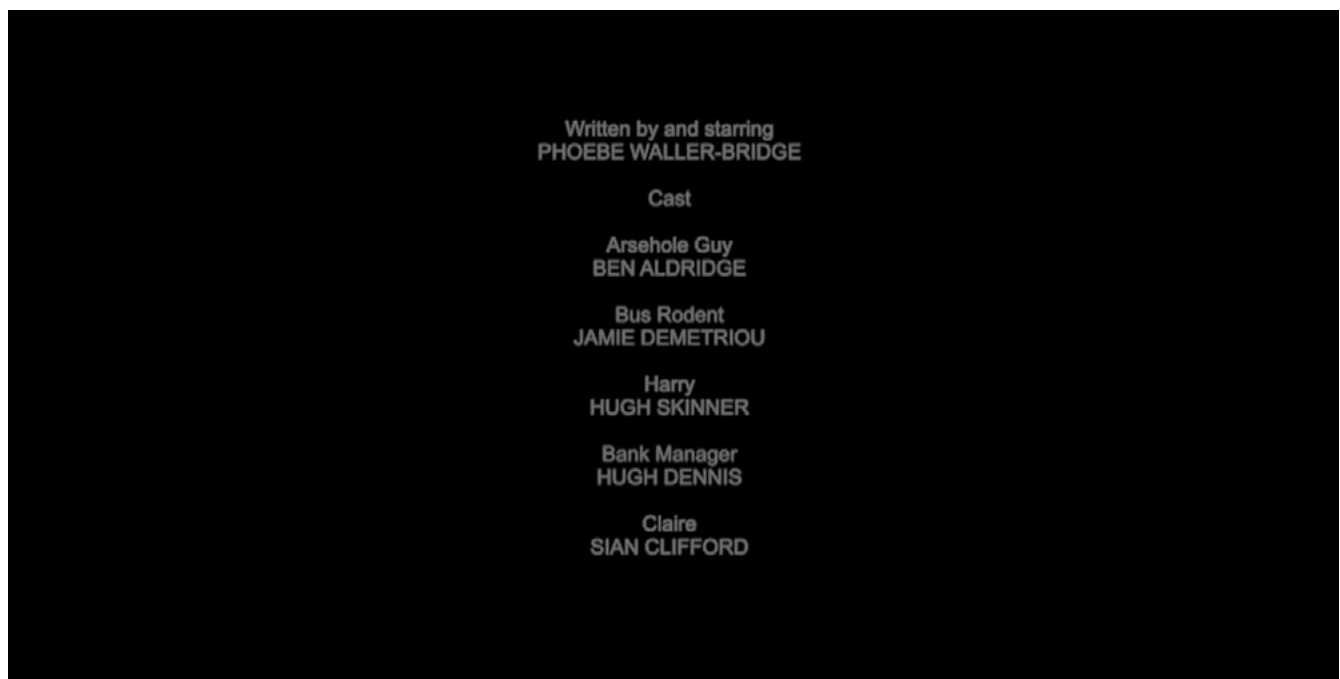


Figure 8

this essay will echo Waller-Bridge and call the character ‘Fleabag,’ while acknowledging that the lack of a diegetic address using this name reinforces the symbolic work done by the paratext.

By avoiding conventional naming structures, *Fleabag* forces the audience to occupy Fleabag’s *weltanschauung*, at least regarding her perception of herself and her relationships with other characters. Fleabag spends the first season haunted by grief, guilt, and anger. Her best friend Boo has committed suicide after learning that her

The lead is not the only character who goes nameless throughout the series. Multiple characters are described in the closing credits by nicknames specific to Fleabag’s interactions with them. Although her sister and her sister’s family—Claire, Martin, and Jake—have given names, two other important characters—Godmother and Dad—do not. These characters’ lack of names is so egregious that the show makes a joke of it in the final episode. At the wedding reception, Godmother starts to introduce the various artist

attendees to the family members. After she presents her assortment of extraordinary, very interesting friends, she gestures toward Dad. The conversation pauses as she gapes, having forgotten his name. Godmother continues, “Oh, my God. This is...this is...God how extraordinary. I just...I always call you ‘darling.’ This is the love of my life.” Valorie Clark at *ScreenRant* notes, “Obviously, this joke is a nod to the audience as much as it is to characterize Godmother. We hardly know anyone’s name in this show, and it can be fun to watch how the truth stays hidden” (Clark).

Beyond simply fun, these credits reinforce the subtext of the family dynamics. Due to Godmother’s assertive romantic pursuit of Dad soon after her mother’s death, Fleabag treats this relationship as intrusive and distasteful. *Fleabag* circumvents the fairy tale cliché of the (evil) stepmother and draws humor from the contrast between the traditional role of godmother as a mentor and protector and the character of Godmother, defined largely by her passive-aggressive cruelty. Additionally, the end credits’ stress on the character’s defining characteristic as godmother to Fleabag and Claire also positions her in the shadow of the unseen, deceased mother—a shadow reinforced by the statue Fleabag alternately steals, returns, and steals. In the final episode, Fleabag learns, as we do, that this bust was modeled on Fleabag and Claire’s mother.

Whereas “Godmother” reinforces the distance between Fleabag and this potential material figure, “Dad” underpins an affection and emotional affinity that is only rarely made explicit on screen. Fleabag initially describes Dad just before she and Claire attend a public talk. She explains to the camera, “Dad’s way of coping with two motherless daughters was to buy us tickets to feminist lectures, start fucking our godmother, and eventually stop calling.” Fleabag’s use of “Dad” without a possessive such as “my Dad” or “our Dad” includes the audience within the intimacy of the family. Subsequent family meals reveal Dad to be a soft-spoken man who often begins a thought without completing it. But in the final episode of each season, Dad speaks forthrightly to Fleabag, about himself and his understanding of her. In the first season, as a drunk Fleabag drops champagne glasses during Godmother’s art

exhibition, Dad angrily declares, “I’m just going to say this once. I deserve to be happy. I am allowed to move on. I have a good life, and I am happy, all right?” Fleabag leaves the exhibition and finds him sobbing on his car in front of the gallery. Although he struggles to identify a similarity between them beyond forehead lines, the show emphasizes their likeness when they execute a simultaneous gesture of wiping their noses with their hands, Fleabag in the foreground, Dad in the center of the frame. He continues, “I think your mother would have admired your little performance up there.” This claim unlocks the possibility of discussing their beloved ghosts. But just as Dad is about to self-disclose, Godmother appears from inside, and he quiets again. In the final episode, he further explains, “You’re not the way you are because of me... You’re the way you are because of her [Fleabag’s mother]. And it’s those bits that you need to cling to...I think you know how to love better than any of us. That’s why you find it all so painful.” Despite the seeming estrangement proposed by Fleabag’s initial description, these conversations demonstrate a sustained empathetic understanding between parent and child.

With the uses and avoidances of sex as a key facet of Fleabag’s emotional development, her perception of her male companions guides their descriptions in the closing credits. Three of the men she has sex with during the series are credited as “Arsehole Guy,” “Bus Rodent,” and “Hot Misogynist.” These are not nicknames, per se, as these characters are not addressed with these descriptors nor do other characters mention them. These names are not inevitable as if sexual proclivities, a meet-cute, and casual misogyny are the only characteristics seen on screen. Instead, these titles reveal Fleabag’s flattening of these potential partners into single characteristics, her ability to “reduce people” in order to dismiss them, and these labels are humorous invitations to the audience to perform the same flattening (Waller-Bridge *Fleabag: Scriptures*, 414-415). Similarly, the unnamed, but recurring “Bank Manager” has no identifier other than his employment, a position he leaves in his fourth and final appearance in the series. Only the lead’s on-again-off-again milquetoast boyfriend, Harry, is credited with a name.

"The Priest," a lover introduced in the second season, is the recipient of Fleabag's genuine affection. As with Bank Manager, his name describes his occupation, and as with the other men, this credit underscores Fleabag's perception of him. It also serves as foreshadowing for the conclusion of the "love story" introduced at the beginning of the second season. In the final episode, having had sex the night before, Fleabag and the Priest sit quietly in a bus stop. She asks, "It's God, isn't it?" and the Priest answers, "Yeah." Although they confess their love for each other, his spiritual vocation triumphs over their chemistry and kinship, an outcome foretold by the closing credits. Following the release of the series in the United States on May 17, 2019, searches for "hot priest" spiked on Google for the remainder of the summer, with multiple headlines adopting the fan term of endearment. Despite the shift from the neutral "the" to the flattering "hot," his occupation remains his defining characteristic for Fleabag and, through her, the audience. Regardless of the bond between the characters, the end credits' episodic reiteration of his occupation affirms the inevitability of his recommitment to his Catholic career.

Jane's title shifts and *Fleabag's* end credits meaningfully defy the clichéd writing advice of "show, don't tell." However, ultimately these paratexts are ephemeral. Although each episode in the second half of *Jane* has a different, temporary title, these titles are not otherwise recorded or made visible. When *Jane the Virgin* is recognized in the press, it is as the unified, overarching *Jane the Virgin*, not as Jane-the-Fill-In-The-Blank. Similarly, when *Fleabag* is distributed by Amazon Prime, the streaming platform defaults to autoplaying the next episode, thus cutting the credits short. Account holders can adjust their settings, but this underlying affordance reveals a devaluing of this paratext in order to more speedily advance the narrative. The feminist implications of *Jane the Virgin's* titles and *Fleabag's* end credits demonstrate the communicative potential of these fleeting on-screen texts and also their fragility. These liminal spaces push feminist filmmaking to the edges of narrative television programs and compel audiences to inhabit the fragmentary, intimate, and challenging female protagonists' world views.

Works Cited

- Ang, Ien. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. Routledge, 1996.
- Ashton, Hilarie. "In Defense of Fleabag Feminism." *Ms.*, 2 January 2019, msmagazine.com/2019/01/02/defense-fleabag-feminism/.
- Aviles, Gwen. "The Impact Of 'Jane The Virgin' Cannot Be Overstated." *HuffPost*, 3 August 2019, huffpost.com/entry/jane-the-virgin-series-finale-latinx-representation_n_5d4486c2e4boacb57fcc4b1a.
- Bentley, Jean. "What's Next for the CW After the End of 'Jane the Virgin,' 'Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,' 'Supernatural,' 'Arrow'?" *The Hollywood Reporter*, 10 April, 2019, hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/whats-next-cw-jane-virgin-crazy-girlfriend-supernatural-arrow-1200879.
- Clark, Valorie. "Fleabag: 10 Times Godmother Was the Worst." *ScreenRant*, 24 July 2019, screenrant.com/fleabag-times-godmother-worst/.
- Desta, Yohana. "How Fleabag Star Phoebe Waller-Bridge Created the Most Perfectly Perverse Character on TV." *Vanity Fair*, 13 June 2017, vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/fleabag-phoebe-waller-bridge.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York University Press, 2010.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding, decoding." *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, Routledge, 1993, pp. 90–103.
- McNamara, Mary. "Column: If there's a theme to the 2020 Golden Globes nominations, it's 'all men, all the time'." *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 2019, latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-12-09/golden-globes-2020-gender-imbalance.
- Nguyen, Hanh. "'Jane the Virgin' Showrunner Scoops Season 3, As the Show Gets Political (Again)." *IndieWire*, 17 October 2016, indiewire.com/2016/10/jane-the-virgin-season-3-spoilers-1201737313/.
- O'Keefe, Meghan. "'Fleabag' is a Brilliant, Raunchy Look into the Mind of the Modern Woman." *Decider*, 16 September 2016, decider.com/2016/09/16/fleabag-review/.

Poggi, Jeanine. "Why the CW is Happy to Grow Up." *AdAge*, 2 April 2015, adage.com/article/media/cw-happy-grow/297888.

Rao, Sonia. "The Golden Globes didn't nominate any women for best director. Or screenplay. Or motion picture." *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2019, washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/12/09/golden-globes-didnt-nominate-any-women-best-director-or-screenplay-or-motion-picture/.

Urman, Jennie Snyder, creator. *Jane the Virgin*. Poppy Productions, RCTV, Electus, CBS Televi-

sion Studios, and Warner Bros. Television, 2019.

van Zoonen, Liesbet. *Feminist Media Studies*. Sage, 1994.

Waller-Bridge, Phoebe, creator. *Fleabag*. Two Brothers Pictures for BBC and Amazon Studio, 2019.

---. *Fleabag: The Scriptures*. New York: Ballantine Books-Random House Publishing Group, 2019.



SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies

Founded in 2008 at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University in Montréal, this double-blind peer-review, open access journal promotes innovative research in Film and Media Studies that spans a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches. *Synoptique* has published special issues on diverse topics such as queer media practices, Indian cinema, moving image archives and the digital transition, film festival networks, queer nationalism, humour and feminist media theory, academic labour, environmental media, and queer animation. As academics within the field re-evaluate its traditional paradigms and position within the academy, *Synoptique* provides a platform for publication, discussion, and reflection on these new political-cultural formations shaping the discourse in film and media studies, and interrogates the economies and politics of scholarly work, addressing dominant trends in academic research conducted within the historical, geographical, ideological, and institutional infrastructure of the globalized, neoliberal university.

Call for Papers

Porn and Its Uses

Responding to the genre's marginal status in the academy and beyond, this special issue seeks to explore how pornography can be (re)framed as useful—pedagogically, politically, aesthetically, and libidinally. Broadly framed, this may refer to pornography as both a difficult object of interest and as a method for critically analyzing the most pressing questions in our current moment. This special issue cheekily gestures towards the serviceability of porn beyond (but certainly not excluding) the titular happy ending. How do we continue to shape a field that embraces knowledge traditionally deemed intellectually and morally suspect while responding to the porn industry's political and economic stakes?

Deadline May 31, 2020

 synoptique.ca
 editor.synoptique@gmail.com
 [synoptiquejournal](https://www.facebook.com/synoptiquejournal)
 [@synoptique](https://twitter.com/synoptique)

Latest Issue



Animating LGBTQ+ Representations
Queering the Production of Movement

eds. Kevin Cooley, Edmond "Edo" Ernest dit Alban, and Jacqueline Ristola

Concordia University
 Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema
 1455 Boul. de Maisonneuve Ouest, FB 319
 Montréal, Québec, Canada H3G 1M8
ISSN 1715-7641
Art by Ramiel, "Flip Floppers Zine"