

## Article

# Art after the Untreatable: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Violence, and the Ethics of Looking in Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You*

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**Abstract:** This essay brings psychoanalytic theory on trauma together with film and television criticism on rape narrative in an analysis of Michael Coel's 2020 series *I May Destroy You*. Beyond the limited carceral framework of the police procedural, which dislocates the act of violence from the survivor's history and context, Coel's polyvalent, looping narrative metabolizes rape television's forms and genres in order to stage and restage both trauma and genre again and anew. Contesting common conceptions of vulnerability and susceptibility that prefigure a violent breach of autonomy, Coel's series and her interviews about it invite an ethics of looking that embraces a curiosity in the unknowable and untreatable kernel of subjective experience and defies and resists a policing of the survivor's thoughts and emotions. By emphasizing and exploring what psychoanalysis calls the "afterwardness" of trauma, Coel foregrounds her main character's subjectivity prior to her victimization, widens the sphere of consequence beyond the victim and criminal justice system to the survivor's larger community, and entreats that community to preserve a space for her to look and look again at everything, without judgment.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis; trauma; rape television; police procedural; trauma; sexual violence; consent; Nachträglichkeit; sexual assault; aesthetics



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In an interview with Jeremy O. Harris in *W Magazine* shortly after the release of Michael Coel's 2020 HBO/BBC series *I May Destroy You*, Coel considers how contemporary culture imposes limits on what survivors of sexual violence are allowed to think and feel about their experience [1]. Describing the aftermath of the sexual assault on which the show is based and the well-intentioned guardrails installed by those around her, Coel says:

My mom called me once, we were just having a normal chat, da-da-da, and then she said, "And, you know, don't worry, okay?" And I was like, "Wait, wait. What? What about?" And she was like, "Oh, you know, they took that thing in *The Economist*. . ." I didn't know what she was talking about, so I had to go and find it. And I found it. I was talking with a journalist, and we came onto how I process my own trauma, and how when we're trying to look after victims of sexual assault, sometimes we protect them from things that there's no danger in. For example, it helped me to look at the fact that I didn't watch my drink. It doesn't make me go, Oh no, it's my fault, but it's like, Let me keep looking at that. And then go, Well, this is hilarious, because it doesn't mean anything. And it's got nothing to do with me. I feel like sometimes we're scared to go there because it leaves us susceptible to self-blame and guilt. But actually, if you allow me to look and realize that I have no guilt or blame here, I'm stronger for it. You have to allow me to look at my actions rather than tell me, 'Don't worry about that. Ignore what anybody's saying about anything' [2].

The problem Coel is noting is not the fact of her or anyone else's susceptibility, but the idea that being "susceptible to self-blame and guilt" could be read by self and others as a danger in the first place—as if a survivor must be protected not only from others, but also from themselves and at the level of their own thoughts. As Erinn Cunniff Gilson observes,

*susceptibility* is a building block of common conceptions of *vulnerability* in the “sociocultural imaginary of the industrialized, capitalist Western parts of the world”, where susceptibility to harm presupposes a specifically sexual form of violence against women [3] (p. 74). Despite its etymological and semantic flexibility, *susceptibility* already pre-figures victims and perpetrators, presupposing borders and trespassers, naïve subjects and malicious actors.

As Cunliffe Gilson suggests, however, the scholarship on vulnerability is not limited to this sense of susceptibility to violence or breach. In another facet of scholarship, vulnerability is “invoked as a fundamental, shared constitutive condition—a way of being open to being affected by and affecting others” [3] (p. 72). If the former conception implies the anticipation of a violent scene or the fragility of autonomy’s delimitation, the latter conception of vulnerability places its emphasis not on the borders of the self, but a share in something common and a prior openness to this condition of being with and affecting others. To be susceptible or vulnerable is not exclusively or necessarily to be in danger; susceptibility can also denote a form of openness or receptivity, as in the Latin *suscipere* (“take up, sustain”, from *sub-* “from below” + *capere* “take”) from which it stems [4].

By staging the scene of susceptibility as a kink in the survivor’s psychological armor, Coel implicitly imports the word’s multiple meanings and suggests that a narrative of susceptibility governs the affective aftermath of sexual violence as much as it does the experience or possibility of experiencing such violence. Put differently, Coel’s evocative phrasing recasts the scene of susceptibility from the perspective of the concerned loved one—here, her mother—who understandably and unintentionally projects their own powerlessness in the face of such horror onto the survivor<sup>1</sup>. And yet, as in so much of Coel’s writing and work, identifying this disagreement with her mother does not read as an accusation, or an outlet for her own powerlessness, but rather as an attempt to name one of the many ways subjects of the drive bump, and sometimes crash, into one another. The point is not to further police what Judith Butler refers to as these “moments of unknowingness”, but to remain curious about them [6]. “You have to allow me to look at my actions rather than tell me, ‘Don’t worry about that. Ignore what anybody’s saying about anything.’”

In the larger context of Coel’s series, *I May Destroy You*, I suggest that we read this passing remark as an ethical injunction to allow the survivor to look at everything, to leave no thought or feeling unexamined, and ultimately to expand the vocabularies and logics available to survivors beyond those of the moral and carceral alone. Coel’s refusal of such an emotional policing does not initiate or demand some new form of policing—policing the police, say—but is rather an invitation to another kind of relation, and specifically a therapeutic relation where this curiosity for unknowingness can be taken up and sustained (*suscipere*). As Coel puts it in her 2018 James MacTaggart Lecture when she urges survivors of sexual violence to seek out free therapy in the UK: “It’s good to talk and engage, with someone else, transparently” [5].

There is a potential risk, however, in letting the clinic stand in for the larger social context in which rape occurs. Citing the legal history of rape, where women’s desire (or lack of desire) at the moment of an attack has played a central role in determining the guilt or innocence of the attacker, Sara Murphy argues that the growing emphasis on clinical interventions in the discourse of rape similarly focuses our collective attention on women’s “mental states” [7] (p. 69). This discursive trend, Murphy argues, participates in the detachment of “sexual violence from the wider context of gender oppression” [7] (p. 69). It is easy to see how one might read this moment in Coel’s MacTaggart Lecture, and her series, as another example of a broader clinical “seepage” into public discourse on rape, but such a reading would neglect the ethical potential of psychoanalysis as a clinic of the *untreatable*, as Willy Apollon insists, and Coel’s series and interviews invite [8]. In contrast to Cognitive Behavior Therapy, psychiatry, and much of psychoanalysis, a clinic of the *untreatable* is not aimed at realigning or reconfiguring the patient for life in the world, but rather emphasizes precisely how, and in what ways, the subject remains permanently at odds *with* their social context. Psychoanalysis makes it possible to imagine a clinic not of the patient, but of the social order that has no place for them.

This essay brings psychoanalytic theory on trauma together with film and television criticism on rape narrative in an analysis of Coel's series *I May Destroy You*. Refusing the narrative arc of the police procedural that dislocates and mythologizes the act of violence from the survivor's history and context, *I May Destroy You* foregrounds the main character's subjectivity prior to her victimization, widens the sphere of influence and consequence beyond the victim and the criminal justice system to the survivor's larger community, and illustrates that survivors need those around them to preserve a space to look at everything without judgment. Survivors have a lot to teach others, Coel suggests, but the process of learning might destroy the moral and imaginary defenses, which audiences consciously or unconsciously install to protect themselves from trauma's wandering and unpredictable force. "[W]hen confronted with these particular inscriptions of the harm of rape", writes Murphy, "we might need to ask to put it colloquially—whose trauma is it anyway?" [7] (p. 69).

Coel's interviews and public comments about her assault, and her intractable commitment to artistic integrity in the face of socio-political norms around sexual violence, testify to an experience of the unconscious. Rather than apply psychoanalysis to Coel's series, and overlay a schema as further proof of the psychoanalytic view, I will consider what, in turn, *I May Destroy You* can teach both psychoanalysis and the socio-legal systems that support and aim to protect survivors of sexual violence. Coel's artistic project ultimately forwards a psychoanalytic understanding of trauma in at least two ways. First, in a conceptual sense, by leaving Arabella's assault offscreen, Coel shows that trauma is often only knowable through repetition and with the resources of the present to bring some meaning to the past—a process that psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists since Freud have called "afterwardness" from the German *Nachträglichkeit*, and which Lacan later articulated in French as *après-coup*. It is crucial to observe, however, that Arabella has only a fragmentary memory of the sexual assault because she was drugged. Methodologically, my move is not to literalize a Freudian conception of trauma or perform a "wild analysis" on Arabella, but instead to consider how the show itself and the repetitions Coel stages cinematically portray and even induce the contours of traumatic experience. Second, and in a more clinical sense, Coel also demonstrates that the artist's or analysand's encounter with these vicissitudes can indeed bring about a traversal, or what Freud called *working through*, with respect to the various demands of others through an act of creation, as we see in the final episode when Arabella completes her book about the night of her assault. This creative act, in the narrative of the show, blurs the boundary between clinical traversal and aesthetic making; in creating, one can perhaps move forward and break a cycle of repetition, but the work of analyzing oneself is also fundamentally a creative process.

Emerging scholarship on *I May Destroy You* has examined the series' portrayal of the stages of trauma and grief in the wake of sexual assault, its intersectional depiction of the labor of believability in its main character's attempts at legal redress, the show's subversion of rape television, and its resistance to genre, among other analyses [9–12]. In contrast to "most British and American television" that "uses assault scenes to pigeonhole victims before they get to be anything else", Caetlin Benson-Allott observes that *I May Destroy You* reinvents rape television by presenting its main characters—Arabella (Michaela Coel), Terry (Weruche Opia), and Kwame (Paapa Essiedu), each of whom experience sexual assault in the show—as loving, strong, hilarious, suffering, complex people first [9] (p. 101). Central to Benson-Allott's reading of the series is the idea that each of these characters is both alone in the specificity of their suffering and also inextricably and porously bound up with the pain and suffering of their friends. Arabella abandons Terry at a club in Italy to get high, Terry in turn leaves Arabella alone at the bar in which she is sexually assaulted, Arabella fails to witness Kwame's suffering in the wake of his own rape, and Kwame sexually assaults someone else in his process of coping. Causality is uncomfortably complicated and none are innocent. In contrast to the contextual and temporal vacuum within which the victim narrative operates, Coel represents the conditions of survivorship beyond victimhood by bringing something far messier and closer to real life to broadcast television than police

procedurals like *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* or *NCIS*. “[T]he trauma of sexual assault”, Benson-Allott writes, “always exceeds the event” [9] (p. 104).

From a more avowedly psychoanalytic perspective, Sarah Temesgen and Paul Wilkinson argue that the therapeutic breakthrough at the conclusion of *I May Destroy You* depicts an acceptance of the self as inherently other. Making a compelling case for psychoanalysis as a useful tool for understanding the series, Temesgen and Wilkinson call attention to Arabella’s therapist’s intervention in the final episode, in which she “draws a line between A (for Arabella) and X (everything bad) in order to discuss “the separation Arabella seems to have between good and bad, Arabella and the night of her rape” [10]. In the series, the line is literally represented as the space under Arabella’s bed, where she has stored police evidence from the night of her rape, and where she figuratively keeps this “bad object” at a distance [10]<sup>2</sup> (p. 304). Stunningly, as Temesgen and Wilkinson observe, “Arabella takes the pen and combines the A, X and the line between them into one image”, and this integrated signifier will become the cover of her second book, titled *January 22, the night of her assault* [13]<sup>3</sup> (pp. 51–53).

Drawing from and moving beyond these readings of the show, I contend that Coel invites her audience into an analytic encounter with the insufficiency of all of the positions allotted to survivors for grappling with loss, and, in the process, allows the audience to bear witness to the interminability of any therapeutic process. Indeed, in tracking, reproducing, and mimicking some of the dominant tropes in rape narratives and contemporary discourse on sexual assault—those of victim, sexual violence activist, and vengeful heroine—*I May Destroy You* renders receivable a range of experiences of and responses to a traumatic event, but it also demonstrates, in Arabella’s winding path of working through, that embodying these tropes or performing them too faithfully can close off avenues of reflection and creation for the survivor and those around them [14]<sup>4</sup> (pp. 653–668).

By insisting on a causal break with the past and a clear source of blame and criminality, the victim narrative reproduces the violent act in a vacuum and denies survivors access to the resources of their own healing, which often arises only when one has the space to acknowledge conflicting emotions or affects in the wake of violence (despair, arousal, guilt, shame, anger). In contrast to police procedurals about sexual violence and the narratives of victimization and susceptibility they reinforce, Coel’s series does not conclude with a confession or an arrest, but with a plurality of new constructions: an unfinished and unclosed loop of possible and imagined endings literally lining the walls of Arabella’s bedroom.

### 1. The Violation of Form and the Form of Violation

In the final episode of Michaela Coel’s series, *I May Destroy You* (2020), Arabella (“Bella”), the show’s main character, is caught in a loop, cycling through three fantasies of her return to the scene of her rape and what it will have meant to confront her rapist [1]. These scenes could easily be read as three fantasies of justice: in the first, Bella acts as vigilante by murdering her rapist (David) and hiding his body under her bed; in the second, Coel enacts something between retributive and restorative justice as Bella learns of David’s sexual addiction but nevertheless lets the police take him away; and finally, in the third, Coel stages a utopian role reversal in which Bella takes David home, consensually tops him from behind in bed, and restores the conditions of consent, power, and pleasure originally denied to her<sup>5</sup>.

Though Coel drew inspiration from Natasha Lyonne’s *Russian Doll* (2019), *I May Destroy You* may not seem at first like a *Groundhog Day* (1993) for the twenty-first century [16]. Coel bends the ethics of the eternal return so central to the *Groundhog Day* time loop to demonstrate on a visceral level how the unfinished and interminable work of trauma takes place in the present and demands something like the energies of an artist to write and work through [15]<sup>6</sup>. The show follows the experiences of sexual assault among its central characters, and represents some of their failed attempts to seek justice under the law, but it is not a police procedural; it shuttles between drama and comedy without settling into any one genre [17]. If it is challenging to categorize this show within the matrix of #MeToo era film and television, or to watch it at all, as many viewers have argued, such difficulties may

suggest something about the impossibility of representing trauma and the discomfort in learning retroactively with the characters where the boundaries of consent are drawn and the sites of traumatic experience are screened.

This difficulty may also suggest something about the show's transgression of or nonconformity with viewers' expectations about what rape television should be or how it should feel. For Lauren Berlant, genre's flexibility and intermittent denial of our expectations is a feature rather than a bug—central to and not a departure from genre's conventional integrity and the forms that enthrall us to the twists and turns of a narrative. If there is pleasure in the familiar, argues Berlant, there is enjoyment (*jouissance*) in its deferral [18]. Desire is sustained by its obstacles. For Berlant, the flexibility of forms and audiences' capacities to bend and smart in response to them is where the aesthetic captures or distills something of history. This reciprocal relationship between form and feeling is what Berlant later terms the *affective contract* [19].

Berlant's theory, which emerges from a reading of sentimentality, is a useful reminder that the transgression of the laws of genre can ultimately serve a conservative function, but this can only take us so far for a show that metabolizes so fully nearly all of rape television's most familiar genres. Coel's *I May Destroy You* does not violate the forms of rape television, bending their rules to captivate her viewership, but rather formalizes violation, proliferating its possibilities and resisting violation's reduction of the violated to the *victim* and the *wound* [7] (p. 76). Like the experience of trauma itself, it is disruptive and surprising, but as Michael Dango argues, Coel also allows her female characters to exit the trauma narrative: experiences like pleasure and laughter are still possible.<sup>7</sup> If the show picks up and tries on the tropes and genres specific to rape narrative, like the revenge fantasy in the final episode, it ultimately fails to make good on these promises of satisfaction. If it offers pleasure, it is not of the order of a gratifying or numbing repetition, as one might find in the trustworthy plot points of a police procedural.

Satisfaction implies conclusion. *I May Destroy You* refuses to satisfy at the level of form, perhaps because the work of healing from trauma, like any analysis (whether of analysand or text), is an unending process. Building on Berlant's concept of the "affective contract", Michael Dango observes that *I May Destroy You*'s "generic promiscuity", and its cycling through horror, comedy, and melodrama, "is one symptom that the affective contract around sexual violence is constantly revised, updated, and amended" [12]. And, as Dango writes elsewhere, Coel was one of many show runners in 2020 in search of the "right emotional genre for rape."<sup>8</sup> Though I agree with Berlant and Dango that form and our expectations of it index culture and history, psychoanalytic theory insists that where the experience of the subject is at stake, formal experiment is not reducible to history, is not without remainder [20]<sup>9</sup> (p. 14). If the show's "generic promiscuity" is a symptom of an unstable affective contract, Coel is also grappling in this series precisely with the limits of rape television's capacity to make promises to its audience by attempting to bring the irreducibility of the subjective experience of violation into form. If Coel is in search of a genre for sexual violence, as Dango suggests, the search, like analysis itself, is interminable [15].

Coel's decision to turn down a USD 1 million Netflix deal to retain creative control over the show further testifies to her commitment to the show as a subjective and aesthetic act [21]. In her interview with O'Harris, Coel addresses her concerns about the way affect is policed in the lives of survivors and their loved ones. She also insists on the necessity for artists to put objects into the world without fearing or minimizing the disquieting and discomforting effects they may have. In contrast to so much of rape television's popular sentimentalism, *I May Destroy You* does not bend genre as a confirmation of audience's capacity to endure; consistent with Coel's own statements on artistic freedom, the show instead invokes something of trauma's unpredictable force. Here, the incongruity between Berlant's characterization of the affective contract specific to sentimentalism and the generic promiscuity of *I May Destroy You*, further clarifies how Coel invites and induces an indefinite



multiplicity of affective engagements and reactions surrounding sexual violence, including not only horror but also humor and even pleasure.

No figure in the series represents more fully Coel's commitment to such an open and indefinite text than the incomplete ring of book pages lining the walls of Arabella's bedroom in the final episode, as she attempts to finish the story of her rape. This unclosed loop is at once the form or figure for Arabella's creative act of working through, and a distillation of the subjective experience of healing from violation as inherently inconclusive and without closure.

## 2. The Clinic of Afterwardness

There is no end or closure, because there is no clear beginning or origin to trauma, no depth to traverse. As Freud discovered at the origins of psychoanalysis, the time of trauma is located in the present, and earlier traumatic experiences are not discovered, but constructed through the process of "deferred action", *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwardness. Freud invents *Nachträglichkeit* as a clinical phenomenon in the process of working out his theory of seduction, which emerged from his clinical treatment of hysteric patients, starting with his collaboration with Josef Breuer and their 1895 *Studies on Hysteria*. The theory revolved around "scenes" communicated to him by his hysteric patients, in which they attested to having been seduced by adults or other children [22]. Our most extensive public accounts of this seduction theory—as opposed to Freud's numerous private letters to Wilhelm Fliess in the 1890's—comes in his 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, where he elaborates the concept of *proton pseudos*, and his 1896 essay, "Aetiology of Hysteria", where he first publicly presents his hypothesis that hysteria can be traced to memories of sexual assault [23,24].

*Proton pseudos*, Latin for "first lie", is Freud's term for the error in association he believed hysteric patients sometimes made, in which they misattributed one experience or memory as the cause of their symptom. Freud illustrates the concept through the now famous example of Emma, who flees a shop after being laughed at by two shopkeepers, only to later realize that her agoraphobia is not the result of this experience alone but the combined effect of two experiences: this more recent adolescent experience, in which she encounters some sexual desire for one of the two shopkeepers, and another set of experiences from her earlier childhood in which a completely different shopkeeper touched her genitals on two separate occasions. "Now this case", Freud writes in the *Project*, "is typical of repression in hysteria. We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action* [*Nachträglichkeit*]" [23]. The key insight here is not that the later memory disguises the earlier (making it more palatable to the ego, say), but that the clinical work of association retroactively constitutes through both memories the earlier scene as traumatic<sup>10</sup>.

The earlier memory is not a buried or repressed trauma, because the trauma is only traumatic in the present, underlined and amplified by the skepticism of the analyst, who, at least in Freud's case, does not disbelieve the facts of the analysand's experience, but the emphasis placed on one experience at the exclusion or repression of another. In noticing something amiss, the analyst asks the patient to say more about it. It is not that Emma has failed to hear the first beat in repetition, but rather that her close listening to the sounds of the present, together with the analyst, creates that repetition in reverse.

Insofar as the psychoanalytic view of belatedness locates trauma in one's experience of the present, this concept profoundly transforms an understanding of the emotions a patient might recall in a treatment. Emma, notably, seems to have experienced something like guilt for having returned to the same shop in which she was assaulted as a child. "She now reproached herself for having gone there the second time", Freud observes, "as though she had wanted in that way to provoke the assault" [23]. It is easy to lose track of the temporality of these statements, and to read Freud as indeed ascribing to Emma some unconscious desire to be assaulted, but the "reproach" Freud mentions is happening in his consulting room, and these feelings are only retroactively ascribed to this earlier scene. This cannot be emphasized enough. What matters in the treatment is that Emma can talk

about this guilt; it is the “bad conscience”, as Freud calls it, that allows him and his patient to link her sexual attraction to the later shopkeeper to this earlier experience of assault, and thus to come to a more comprehensive construction about the logic of her agoraphobia [23].

Like the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis to say whatever comes to one’s mind, Coel similarly calls for a looking without censorship, and this injunction extends as much to the survivor as to those around her, who may with the best of intentions actually prevent the flow of thinking and feeling that allows the survivor to make some sense of what they have experienced. Returning to the analysis of Coel’s interview with which I began, the clinic of afterwardness might allow us to understand susceptibility not solely as a risk of harm or influence, but as a receptivity to something strange and enigmatic, and indeed as a slow and iterative exploration of the resistances that prevent the survivor from exploring without judgment everything about their experience.

This concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is helpful in an analysis of Coel’s show, because it allows us to understand the time of trauma as fundamentally in the present; working with and through that trauma, psychoanalysis is a process of constructing meaning, observing affects, and creating links between memories. In this way, psychoanalytic practice as an art of association inherently resists the sort of narrative structure that underpins the police procedural, where the act of violence involves a narrative cut: a before and after that denies the audience access to the victim’s humanity in all its complexity. *I May Destroy You*, by contrast, tarries with a temporal looping and repetition as the audience shuttles from the present to Arabella’s, Terry’s, and Kwame’s pasts and back again. Symptoms and heartaches play out over decades, and, like an actual analysand, Coel gives the audience so much material that it overflows any attempt at exhaustive interpretation.

### 3. The Unconscious That “Never Stops”

An illustrative example of the excesses of potentially signifying material in Coel’s show is the last episode, when she stages three back-to-back fantasies in Arabella’s attempt to resolve the narrative of her book. These scenes are animated, as a dream is by the “day’s residues”, by the discourses and figures of contemporary Anglo-American culture in the wake of feminist social movements like #MeToo and Time’s Up [25]<sup>11</sup> (p. 228). Indeed, Coel brings the audience on a tour through revenge fantasy, softer encounters with restorative justice, and role reversing libidinal liberation. As much as the show illustrates these popular emblems of rape culture and feminist modes of redress and potential healing—including social media activism, sexual assault support groups, therapy, and friendship—it also underlines the inherent insufficiency of these forms of justice and support for both the survivor and those who may wish to help, or simply find themselves in trauma’s path of destruction.

In an NPR interview, upon being asked about her own healing process in the wake of her assault during the filming of *Chewing Gum* (2015), Coel describes the various forms of self-care she sought out, including yoga, meditation, and painting. Though a part of her process, Coel says:

but it [self-care] doesn’t equate to some sort of resolution, some sort of finale, some sort of ‘I’m all better now.’ It’s just things that we do to carry on and to help us focus and to help us breathe, and so I went through all of those things, but also I think whilst I did those outward things, maybe there’s an internal thing going on as well, and the journey never ends. Yeah, I think it was part of my process. It is part of my process, because it goes on, doesn’t it? It never stops [26].

Like Coel’s own experience, Arabella spends much of the show seeking out and practicing forms of self-care to cope with what has happened to her. These only take her so far. Arabella also does not find the man who assaulted her, nor does she find a satisfying answer or explanation for her suffering, but she does discover in the repetitions of her actions and the relief she finds in her own creative process that survival is not only or simply a process of discovery, but also an interminable act of invention.

Psychoanalysis as a clinical method could not have emerged without an acknowledgement on the part of the founder himself of the impossibility of ever getting to the bottom

of the unconscious, of finding the one memory responsible for the neurotic symptom. As Freud writes in his letter to Fliess in September 1897, it is his “continual disappointment in [his] efforts to bring a single analysis to a real conclusion” that he counts among his reasons for losing confidence in the seduction theory [27]. This statement does not yet have the maturity of Freud’s later claims in *Analysis Terminable Interminable* (1937), where, at the end of his life, he describes how and why analysis “keeps on not working”, as Adam Phillips puts it [28]<sup>12</sup> (p. 1). And yet, we do see a kernel of this later argument in his letter to Fliess: “If one thus sees that the unconscious never overcomes the resistance of the conscious, the expectation that in treatment the opposite is bound to happen, to the point where the unconscious is completely tamed by the conscious, also diminishes” [27]. Though preliminary, Freud anticipates here a core facet of Lacanian and post-Lacanian conceptions of the unconscious, such as when Lacan argues in *Seminar XXIV* that even at the so-called “end” of an analysis, the “unconscious remains . . . Other”, or when Willy Apollon describes the unconscious as the “untreatable source of all the [analysand’s] ills, which stymies all possible therapy” [8,29]. Contrary to Freud’s wish for his own discovery in the mid-1890s, there is no ultimate cure to the hysteric’s suffering, even if they find relief in the treatment, because there is no bottom or ground to stand on, no depth to traverse.

Glossing on both Freud and Lacan, Apollon observes in “The Untreatable” (2006) that the unconscious is “neither the depot nor the memory of the traumas and tragedies of his personal history”<sup>13</sup> (pp. 25–36). In this essay, Apollon distinguishes medical care from psychoanalytic treatment, and the title plays on the polyvalence of the French word *intraitable*, which is unknown in the English language for its double meaning of intractable and untreatable<sup>14</sup>. The unconscious, in other words, is not a container of content or a log of traumatic experiences; it also does not offer excavatable content—repressed or otherwise—that might explain why any one of us suffers or enjoys. Rather than a depth psychology, psychoanalysis proceeds by way of inferences constructed through one’s analysis of the inexplicable behaviors and in the lapses in the otherwise smooth functioning of the ego narrative. At the end of an analysis, one is not equipped with a knowledge but an “ethical responsibility in relation to something irreducible that [she] discovers within [herself]” [8]. Here, the double meaning of the French *intraitable* on which Apollon is playing bears out: the subject is ultimately untreatable because the unconscious is intractable. The analysand proceeds by way of noticing this irreducible and unquantifiable intractability and then changing the way she relates to herself and others in response.

Coel’s comments on her own experience in the wake of assault testify to this intractable kernel of the unconscious. She arrives there, it seems at least in part, through an experience of sexual trauma, but in looking discovers something in herself—this unfinished work of healing—that exceeds the act of violence and opens onto a creative horizon where meaning must be continuously renewed and remade. If the unconscious is not a repository of traumatic memories, but the rift the analysand notices in the story she tells about herself, following this rift can demand a change, and an ethical stance with regard to what in her does not stop.

#### 4. “Exigent Sadism” in Art and Analysis

In the first of three scenes in the final episode of *I May Destroy You*, Arabella’s best friend Terry hypothesizes as to why her friend, who, some months earlier, was drugged and raped at a bar named Ego Death, kept returning to the bar to find her perpetrator. “I thought you were mentally ill”, Terry says, facing Arabella in the dimly lit bathroom, somewhat pained in her delivery [1]. The crass joke does not land, and she swallows some disbelief perhaps in the sentiment or in her own performance. Were it not for this faint flash of inauthenticity in Terry’s eyes (she’s also struggling to make it as an actor), viewers might imagine this comment to be sincere. The audience soon learns, however, that this is a shifting version of the same scene or fantasy playing out three times back-to-back in this final episode. Arabella is writing these scenes, and figuratively returning to the scene of the crime, to complete her second book on the experience of her assault. She is also enlisting her friends as phantasmatic actors in the writing and reworking of the narrative,



and Terry's pained delivery might instead (also?) be read as Arabella's internalized self-criticism regarding the sufficiency of this scene, or perhaps any, to complete the story. Those scenes run as follows:

1. In the first, Arabella and her friend Terry spot David, the rapist, at the bar, and together with another friend who runs a sexual assault support group, the three exact revenge on him: tricking him into repeating his earlier violent act, confronting him, drugging him, following him out of the bar, exposing his penis, and then in a fit of violent rage, strangling and beating him to death.
2. In the second, under Terry's guidance, Arabella takes comically large amounts of cocaine, allows David to drug her, and then after he pulls her into the same bathroom stall where the original rape happened, she confronts him. He calls her a whore and machinates pathetic justifications (he actually says: "There's wars going on in Iraq, and you're making a big old drama 'cause some bloke slipped a pill in your drink and wants to fuck your brains out in a nightclub?") [1]. Shortly after, David breaks down in tears, Bella kisses him, and then hides him from the police long enough to offer him comfort and understanding for his confessed perversion: he is a serial rapist and admits he cannot stop, and even received treatment in prison once before. Bella embraces him before the police gently lead him away.
3. And finally, in the third, in a role reversal, the same scene is set in the daytime in an empty bar, and this time Arabella is the one to ask David if she can buy him a drink, he fumbles the answer ("Gin and orange"), just like she does in the first scene, and the two of them return to her apartment to have ecstatic sex that concludes with Arabella topping David from behind. She sends him away in the morning after he tells her he will not leave until she asks him to. She tells him to "Go" with a frank artlessness, and he gets up with the intention of an automaton and exits the scene.

Each of the scenes in this triptych becomes progressively tighter: the first plays out a revenge fantasy in fairly horrifying detail; the second speeds it up with a manic intensity that softens into a hackneyed demonstration of compassion for the abuser who is himself a victim of abuse; and the third feels the most surreal, but perhaps also the most libidinally attentive—more irreverent to the cultural prescriptions of what a woman is supposed to feel about an experience of sexual assault<sup>15</sup> (pp. 12,158,182). That the first scene feels the most in step with reality—even though it is by far the most violent—should perhaps raise one's hackles as to what kind of narratives are most appetizing to one's ego's sense of self-control [30].

One way of describing Coel's restaging of this scene, and Arabella's actual nightly return to the bar Ego Death, is through Freud's understanding of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For Freud, it is the fallout from trauma that reveals a mode more primary than the pleasure principle. This earlier principle, which he eventually names the death drive, is only discernible through the subject's repetitive return to the scene of the trauma to regain some purchase on an experience that broke through the organism's "protective shield" [31]. Such an event is traumatic, Freud explains, because the individual or entity was caught off guard without anticipatory apprehension. The compulsion to return is not inherently destructive of self or others, but a recursive attempt at the level of a more primary principle to experience the trauma anew, this time armed with the anticipation one could not have known was necessary.

If the destruction at stake in the death drive is revealed only in the compulsion to repeat, the addressee in the title of the show, *I May Destroy You*, can be read again not as an address to any person, but something strange and incomprehensible within one's own subjective experience. If there is no other to whom this "You" can be earnestly addressed, this is not only because the real David never shows up at the bar Ego Death, and the potential revenge plot fails, but because even as the cause of this violence came from without, Bella's aesthetic re-writing of the experience puts her in touch with the enigmatic kernel of her own subjective constitution. The tenderness Bella extends to the phantasmatic

David in this third scene, then, is not empathy for her rapist but an ethical regard for the infinitely unknowable subject of the unconscious.

In her interview with Jeremy O'Harris in *W Magazine*, Coel describes the experience of discomfort from art as a right that needs to be extended to everyone, including Black authors and audiences:

We deserve to be made uncomfortable, too, and that discomfort is so raw and so outrageous. The audience should be allowed to feel those things. We shouldn't make work that simply panders to whatever the political norm is right now, unless there is a way you can do that, that stimulates the audience and gives them that feeling the storytelling is supposed to give them. It's fear-based. We can't be afraid as writers to bring discomfort to anyone [2]<sup>16</sup>.

The discomfort Coel describes is not a sadism for the sake of shock value alone, but more in keeping with what Avgi Saketopoulou describes in *Sexuality Beyond Consent* (2023) as "exigent sadism" [30]. There, Saketopoulou defines exigent sadism as the creation of a "space that can possibly bring in something really opaque, to open us to the wound in the other and to the wound in the self, but also may create, along with it, a form of support that is not in keeping with our usual understanding of consent or sadism" [30]. For Saketopoulou, art and psychoanalysis can both bring us into contact with this enigmatic opacity of the unconscious: this is a sadism of the consulting room and theater, not a valorization of the pleasure in cruelty.

We learn at the conclusion of each of these three scenes that Arabella is actually writing them into existence. Hung around the perimeter of her bedroom are notecards outlining the main thrusts of her unfinished book. These scenes are attempts to complete the circle, but the show does not give us the satisfaction of knowing which of the three—if any—will actually close the loop. "By combining multiple opportunities for catharsis within a single episode", Benson-Allott observes, "Coel offers such an abundance of closures that viewers can appreciate how ambivalent the concept really is. Every ending precludes others, and none reverses the harm done" [9] (p. 105). What we see instead is that Arabella fashions a new way of relating to her friends and community; rather than returning to the bar to stake out her rapist, she decides instead to stay home and watch TV with her flat mate. She finishes her book and dedicates it to her friend Terry, who she has been until then unable to attend to, even though Terry and Kwame have both experienced different forms of sexual assault in earlier episodes. The show concludes at the moment of Arabella reading the first word of her self-published book aloud at a bookstore.

If Arabella's return to the "scene of the crime" offers a representation of the repetition at work in the drive, her refusal to sew up the narrative with a satisfying conclusion represents the ethical stakes of taking responsibility for the interminability of any treatment and the unfinished and unfinishable project of healing. Terry and Arabella also repeat this phrase, "return to the scene of the crime", like an anthem in their nightly visits to the bar, confusing the distinction between victim, perpetrator, and police and infusing the traumatic context with the giddy humor that has defined their friendship since high school. As much as Arabella's therapist helps her draw the line between good and bad object, self and other, Terry also sustains in these nightly visits a curiosity in the unknown that allows Arabella to punctuate the repetition and share her story with others.

## 5. Conclusions

Like the victim it presupposes, *rape*, as a signifier in the history of feminism and aesthetic form, is also susceptible to "cultural metaphor-making" [7] (p. 77). And, there can be no doubt this signifier is vulnerable to such projections because it has come to designate in the popular imaginary cognitive, bodily, and spiritual vulnerability as such. The ethics of looking offers a method to meet these well-worn metaphors; *I May Destroy You* shares with psychoanalytic method a resistance to formal closure and easy answers, and perhaps in this way, both concerns and irritates the place in rape narratives and forms where discourses (feminism, psychology, law) intersect and become entangled. If the clinical has seeped into

broadier discourse on women's oppression and sexual violence, as Sara Murphy argues, then rape genres need new clinics [7] (p. 74). Psychoanalysis, in turn, can familiarize itself with genre's tendency toward reductive and monolithic representation—even and perhaps especially when those genres delight by deception or deferral—in order to hear where in the analysand's discourse something unusual and singular presents itself on behalf of the subject.

At times irreverent toward the expected guardrails and expectations surrounding discourse and art on sexual assault, *I May Destroy You* puts everything on the table, including the possibility of the destruction of self, other, and audience: it reflects back at us the revenge fantasies populating contemporary media on sexual violence; it dramatizes how a turn to social media activism can animate certain stages of grief; and it expands the domain of trauma in the wake of assault beyond the victim to her entire social network, showing the ripple effects of one person's experience of victimization in the lives of others. In a manner that refuses to moralize about exactly what a survivor must say and do in the wake of an assault, each of these currents in Arabella's experience offer the audience only temporary investment or release. Before long, they are asked to move on to the next stage or the next coping strategy; viewers are denied a plot that will ruminate on any one at the exclusion of any other stage in the grieving process. There are scenes that bear familiar rallying cries—like the powerful poem Arabella reads to her support group—and others that flirt with a generic satisfaction—such as the revenge plot in the first of three possible endings in the final episode—but the viewer can point to none of these as the place or position where Arabella ultimately lands.

If the plot pivots ceaselessly, the title of the show also performs semantic acrobatics. The phrase, “I may destroy you”, evinces something like vengeance, but the revenge plot implied or inferred here ultimately fails. Bella instead moves on to other possibilities, and the register of the address shifts from the characters within the series to an address by Coel to her audience. Here, the title's menacing politeness—*I May Destroy You*—confuses and recombines the grammatical conditions of consent and threat: Is Coel issuing a warning or asking for permission? Or, perhaps more precisely, is she marking an uncertainty that only time and interpretation will bear out?

Read now as an address to the audience, the probable hypothetical ‘may’ also raises the question of whether the audience will submit themselves to, and indeed receive, the challenging narrative Coel has created. If there is a receptivity at stake here, it is not a matter of whether we are ‘tough enough’ to withstand what many viewers of the show have described as its anxiety-inducing moments.<sup>17</sup> Instead, and in betraying Coel's commitment to an exigent sadism of the small screen, the title issues an unusual invitation to become curious about the unconscious, even or perhaps especially when destruction is at stake. Such curiosity and investment in the unconscious is a condition for psychoanalysis to begin at all, but it is not a given that such work will ever actually begin. In order for it to start, one must commit to radical self-reflection, with being, as Freud wrote to Fliess, “completely honest with oneself” [27]. The “may” in the title then is not only a promise made with uncertainty, but an enactment of the ethical choice any subject must make in following the wayward path of unconscious desire and taking the risk of creating something new. The crux of the ethics of psychoanalysis is what we do with the knowledge of the unconscious once we follow its reverberations. It is one thing to enter the analysis and follow the path, and quite another, as Apollon writes, “to assume the consequences of such a knowledge and thus to take ethical responsibility toward oneself and toward others” [8].

As Coel insists in the interview with O'Harris, looking at her life in the aftermath of her experience of sexual assault does not mean that she is responsible for her rape, but, as the show ultimately stages, she is also the only one who can take responsibility for her life in its wake. Of course, Bella has Terry, who accompanies her friend dutifully on the nightly visits to Ego Death. She also has a therapist who helps Bella notice in the repetitions of her behavior an unconscious logic that forces a choice: continue to return to the scene of the crime to anticipate what she could not have anticipated, or confront what has already happened and for which all anticipation is therefore too late. Though they can serve as

witnesses and companions to her suffering, following her into the void, neither Terry nor Bella's therapist can act on or change Bella's life. And, Bella does change her life: she recommits to her relationships with close friends and finishes her book.

In calling for the necessity of being able to look at everything in the wake of an assault, Coel gestures toward an ethics of looking that extends beyond the often rarefied space of the psychoanalytic consulting room, and certainly beyond the forensics lab and the police station, to the everydayness of relationships marked by trauma. An ethics of looking would insist on standing vigil alongside the survivor rather than erecting new defenses and boundaries that aim to protect them from their experience. It would ask those closest to a survivor to consider how their own anxiety in the wake of this violence, and especially their attempts to correct after the fact for a violence they did not or could not prevent or anticipate, may unintentionally circumscribe the survivor in a narrative of susceptibility or victimhood. And finally, such an ethics is founded on the recognition of and perhaps even pleasure in the unyielding work of interpretation and creation that follows after the untreatable.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The point here is not to criticize Coel's mother, who is actually a mental health specialist in the UK and an advocate for free healthcare, but to underline without judgement an example of a larger trend Coel is unearthing in the experiences of survivors. Coel describes her mother's profession, as well as her role in making Coel aware of mental health counseling resources, in her 2018 James MacTaggart Lecture [5].
- <sup>2</sup> For Temesgen and Wilkinson, the breakthrough Arabella experiences in her final therapy session of the series constitutes "a shift from the Kleinian schizoid to depressive position". The schizoid position is one in which both the self and object are split between good and bad, the maternal breast being the most important and classical example of an object for Klein. By contrast, the depressive position designates an integration of the good with the bad, and an acceptance of a strange and often violent otherness within [10].
- <sup>3</sup> As Katharina Hausladen notes, *January 22nd* was the original working title of the series [13].
- <sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship has shown both the positive and negative effects of sexual violence activism on social media for survivors of sexual assault. See Strauss Swanson and Szymanski (2020) [14].
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Dango offers a similar reading of these three scenes that also considers the role of genre in Coel's varying representations of justice: "In the series finale, Arabella tries out three different ways of ending her story. The first two pursue a kind of retribution: either vigilante violence in the genre of rape revenge (à la *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) or police capture that turns into private counseling of the rapist in the genre of the redemptive melodrama. In the third version, a utopian genre, gender roles are more malleable; we see Arabella's naked body, but, rather than being raped like Kwame's, it is sensually positioned on top of her rapist, penetrating him in what seems to be a mutually pleasurable experience" [15].
- <sup>6</sup> The ultimate loop, "*I May Destroy You*", ends up being about the origin and creation of *I May Destroy You*" [15].
- <sup>7</sup> Michael Dango argues that though Coel does update the genre of rape for the show's female characters, she does not extend the same to Kwame, whose rape "is depicted graphically, from the perspective of a bystander who sees the whole scene. In turn, his body performs the labor, traditionally delegated in sensational fashion to women, of bearing the physical locus of harm" [15].
- <sup>8</sup> In addition to *I May Destroy You*, Dango observes that Laurie Nunn's *Sex Education* and Liz Garbus's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* also experiment with the "right emotional genre for rape" in a moment that is marked by, "but no way contained by, #MeToo" [15].
- <sup>9</sup> See Copjec (1994) [20]. Copjec offers a succinct summary of her Lacanian argument against historicism and historicist readings of cultural objects at the conclusion of the book's first chapter: "If this book may be said to have one intention, it is this: to urge analysts of culture to become literate in desire, to learn how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements" [20].
- <sup>10</sup> It is important to note that Strachey's translation of *Nachträglichkeit* as "deferred action" misses the retroactive function of the concept and retains a deterministic causality.
- <sup>11</sup> Freud first references "day's residues" in the *Interpretation of Dreams* as follows: "[S]timuli arising during sleep are worked up into a wish-fulfilment the other constituents of which are the familiar psychical 'day's residues'" [25].

- <sup>12</sup> In his introduction to the 2002 edition of Freud's *Wild Analysis*, Phillips examines the practice of failure at the heart and end of any analysis: "Indeed, in the late paper 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', published in 1937 (when Freud was eighty-one), Freud goes as far as to suggest that one of the ways the analyst knows that she is practising real psychoanalysis is that the real psychoanalysis keeps on not working in the same ways. It is consistent in what it fails to do for people — to free them, for example, from the special attractions of their history, from telling certain kinds of family stories, from the appeal of particular fears" [28].
- <sup>13</sup> Apollon writes: "One will thus say that a psychiatrist cares and that a psychoanalyst treats. An interesting French idiom allows us to underscore this difference. When one says of someone that he is *intraitable*, this means that he is intractable, that he refuses to compromise his principles" [8].
- <sup>14</sup> As Michael Dango argues, if we can read the third scene as a "utopian genre", this might suggest that "'the solution' to rape is not about criminalization, but about cultural transformation of gender and gender roles" [15].
- <sup>15</sup> As Avgi Saketopoulou puts it: "hellish nightmares are preferable to the ego than to risk its own undoing" [30].
- <sup>16</sup> Coel agrees with O'Harris that Black artists and audiences deserve to make and experience disquieting work ("We deserve"), but then immediately universalizes the role of the artist, the right to discomfort, and the function of storytelling [2].
- <sup>17</sup> The show has generally garnered praise for its realistic portrayal of sexual assault from critics and survivors alike, but several viewers have described their difficulty in watching certain moments in the series. See, for example [32].

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