



En thérapie: What We Can Learn from a Television Adaptation Depicting a Contemporary Psychoanalytic Practice, and How This Relates to Today's 'Malaise In Culture'

by

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Abstract

The success in France of the television series *En thérapie* directed by Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano – and inspired by the Israeli series *BeTipul* and its American incarnation *In Treatment* – is striking. Unlike much contemporary television it stands out for a number of reasons: its apparently slow pace, its depiction of what is not usually shown on screen, and its presentation of the analytical process. Here, we will look at the place of the psychoanalyst in contemporary society and analyse the narrative-of-the-self on screen. This article will decipher the enthusiasm of viewers and examines how the psychoanalytic process is ‘told’ and put into images. The television series is envisioned as a transitional space reflecting the ‘[contemporary] malaise in culture’, while showing what is invisible and ineffable in the analytical process.

Keywords: image; unconscious; psychoanalysis; spectacle; scopic drive

To cite as: Delahaye, M. and Pestre, E. (2026), "En thérapie: What We Can Learn from a Television Adaptation Depicting a Contemporary Psychoanalytic Practice, and How This Relates to Today's 'Malaise In Culture'," *PsyArt* 30, pp.1-28.

Introduction

Contemporary French society — as in many other media-saturated cultural contexts — evolves in a continuous flow of images, where the boundaries between the public and private spheres are blurred, while screens proliferate and ‘everything must be seen, everything must be shown’. Eager for images, Western society in particular feeds on and appeals to the scopic drive in each of us (through advertising, for example). Consuming images, being seen, looking at oneself, these are the variations of this new social constraint ‘to see’. The injunction to see, show, and be seen is particularly crystallised via new communication platforms and broadcasting interfaces – such as YouTube, Netflix, Instagram, TikTok, but also on 24-hour news channels. The live viewing of armed attacks, hospitals in crisis, or scenes of death and destruction, exposes the viewer to a continuous flow of violent images or pornographic advertisements. This pervasive mediatisation-by-image underpins the idea that perceptible reality, captured at a specific moment and broadcast immediately, is equivalent to the ‘truth’, something unique and irrefutable.

Within the contemporary French political and social landscape — where the legitimacy of psychoanalysis is frequently questioned in public debates and where psychological care is increasingly shaped by demands for rapid, measurable outcomes — the unprecedented success of *En thérapie*, the French television series by Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano calls for reflection, and appears even, at first glance, paradoxical. Season 1 of *En thérapie* attracted on average 2.08 million viewers on the TV channel Arte, with 36.5 million views online, while season 2 totalled 52 million views, including 26.4 million on arte.tv, with an average of 1.2 million viewers (*Bilan Audiences 2022*, n.d.; Langard, 2021). The format of *En thérapie*, as in its Israeli (*BeTipul*) and North American (*In Treatment*) antecedents, follows that of a prime-time serialized drama designed for a broad television audience in France. Its weekly broadcast

on *Arte* — a public channel known for its culturally engaged programming — positions the series at the intersection of both mainstream accessibility and more intellectual expectations regarding representations of mental health. If other successful series of the moment are commonly synonymous with stunts and action scenes, it is clear that in *En thérapie* there is, in appearance, almost nothing happening – at least not in the register of the visible. As part of a culture of therapy or ‘therapy culture’ that we will discuss later in this article, *En thérapie* might, in part, also bring to mind ‘slow TV’ (Gervais, 2020). It differs from it though because, beyond the rhythm and form of the series, its object (psychoanalysis and the analytical cure in a contemporary context) as well as its scenario (the subjective history of patients within a social context, and the relationship of transference/countertransference) certainly contribute to creating an object of entertainment, but also creates a space for reflection. The term reflection can thus be understood here in two ways, not just as an act of thinking, but also as a proposed specular and identifying space for viewers – already the beginnings of a transitional space.

The French incarnation of this series places the psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic scene (that ‘other scene’ that is the unconscious) and the invisible that it appears to imply, at the forefront of the social and cultural scene. *En thérapie* is an adaptation of the Israeli series *BeTipul*, and the North American series *In Treatment*. It is constructed around the unfolding of an ordinary week in the consultation rooms of a psychoanalyst, Philippe Dayan. The pace is slow and characterised by the apparent immobility of the scenes; an important place is given to the characters’ silences and introspections. For those reasons, it was necessary to reflect on how to stage what was latent in the images, how to visually represent the invisible of the process of psychoanalysis, and how to show the ineffable in narrative, while also keeping the viewer in a kind of suspense. Each episode – thirty-five in total for each of the two seasons – presents a session with one of the four regular patients. At the end of each week, we see the psychoanalyst’s supervision session with his mentor. This weekly rhythm to the broadcast of

the series – on television and online – could evoke that of therapy itself, thus accentuating the echo between the content and the form of the series.

The context for each of the seasons is that of collective events imbued with trauma. The first season was aired in the wake of the 13 November 2015 terrorist attacks on Paris. The second takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of lockdowns. In that regard, a television series, through its structure and its inscription in contemporary culture, resembles an extension of cultural interactions and experiences (Winnicott, 1971b), offering a space for psychic creativity and elaboration.

Thus, the common political dimension of the scenarios of all three dramas (*BeTipul*, *In Treatment* and *En thérapie*) addresses shared national and international traumas (Bainbridge, 2012; Kahr, 2012), and offers spectators a space to formulate their own reflection. In an article by Audrey Fournier, published in *Le Monde* in January 2021, the journalist argued that this series was a “subtle staging of a personal and collective trauma” (« *En thérapie* », *une série à la subtile mise en scène d’un trauma personnel et collectif*, 2021). Studies have shown that in recent years viewers were widely exposed to the raw media images of the **November 13** attacks, and then to the pandemic. That context has trapped them in a state of passive submission to the authority of the spectacular (Houssier, 2020; Mondzain, 2007).

Just before the Second World War, the philosopher Walter Benjamin (1939) had already observed the erection of a ‘watertight partition’ between information and the reader’s experience. This separation made the modern subject a subject amputated of their history, and blinded by an overload of information. According to Benjamin, the advent of the reign of information, and the erosion of experience, were consubstantial with the decline of narrative. Narrative, however, is an integral part of the analytical work (Freud, 1900; Samacher, 2015) and more particularly of the clinical work of listening performed by the analyst. The uniqueness and authenticity that gave an object its aura are, according to (1931), transformed, and shock

replaces the aura and the *punctum* – the latter being defined by Barthes (1980) as a visual ‘sting’ that unexpectedly touches the spectator’s psyche. These ideas resonate with those of Mondzain (2003) for whom contemporary society is synonymous with an ‘empire of visibility’ that gives a preponderant place to ‘the obscenity of the real’ by constantly reaffirming its leading role. In this context of exhibition, what ultimately happens to what is not filmed? What happens to what is not shown, what is hidden, or what is suppressed from the screen concerning the analytical scene?

The question we need to ask is what can have aroused such enthusiasm for this series, not only on the part of viewers of the French version, but also from those of the Israeli and North American versions? This is an enthusiasm that has made the series *En thérapie* a societal phenomenon, and the representation of psychoanalysis on television an international phenomenon. How can the psychoanalytic process, as well as metapsychology, be shown as images, and told in the form of a narrative that can be so cinematically attractive? In other words, how can the invisible part of the analytical process have been shown so successfully through a popular television series? The aim of this article is to analyse the place of the psychoanalytically trained psychologist in contemporary society; a society within which therapy is often viewed as a consumer item, and an integral part of the ‘happiness industry’. Given the current prevalence of the specular, we will also reflect on the place of a narrative-of-the-self that is based on the field of the visible.

In order to present an answer to these questions we will first define what we call the current discontent or malaise in culture, and its link with the prevalence of the visible with its logic of the spectacular. To do that we first need to understand how *En thérapie* was able both to create something from that malaise, and to represent it. We will then address the question of showing psychopathology on screen, and the role of the therapist. The scopic and epistemophilic drives that are fed by the series, as well as its overall success, will also be discussed. Beyond the scopic

pleasure, we will also analyse the combination of the invisible and visible through images and narrative – narrative being presented as a central element of the psychoanalytic work. We will consider *En thérapie* as the theatre of certain contemporary affects as they are developed in and through fiction. Finally, we will conclude by looking at the importance of soundtrack and sound effects as a means of narrating current forms of analytical work.

1. *En thérapie* or, the staging of discontent in contemporary culture

To situate our study of a contemporary ‘malaise (or discontent) in contemporary culture, it is necessary to recall what Freud (1930) means by the ‘malaise in culture’ or ‘civilization’s discontent’, depending on the translation.

In 1930, Freud elaborated on his insights regarding the conflict between the life drive and the death drive. To do so, he highlights the paradox in which human beings evolve: namely, the tension between a civilization designed to protect them and, simultaneously, one that threatens to destroy them, reflecting the conflict between the life and death drives. The question of civilization’s discontent is therefore inherent to civilization itself and cannot be regarded as pathological *per se*. Freud’s (1930) notion of malaise can be understood as arising from the encounter between cultural demands and instinctual life. From this encounter emerges a sense of guilt associated with the superego. Freud thus describes a ‘superego of the civilized community’ [our translation] (*Kultur-Überich*), which imposes an unattainable ideal upon each individual. This gives rise to moral anxiety and fosters a sense of guilt, forming the foundation of a diffuse malaise.

In *En thérapie*, this dynamic is reflected in the experiences of both patients and the psychoanalyst, in relation to pressures from social and personal norms: guilt, anxiety, and feelings of failure appear as manifestations of this internalized collective moral demand. In line with Freud’s observations on modern civilization—where progress and the mastery of human forces are inseparable from the potential for self-destruction and generalized anxiety—the

series illustrates the unfolding of contemporary malaise, revealing both the psychological vulnerability of subjects and the structural tensions of the society in which they live.

In addition to showing what is usually not accessible to the viewer – a psychoanalytic practice, and the sessions that take place there – *En thérapie* depicts the intertwining of current individual and collective concerns. A common social base of experiences, whose traumatic impacts have been most significant in recent years (2015 attacks on Paris, and the Covid-19 pandemic) formed the backdrop to the scenarios and the direction of the two seasons. Thus, the meshing of singular and collective issues constituted the common thread of both seasons, which depicted the effects of collective events on individual subjects.

To give an example, in season 1 the relationship between Ariane's character and Dr. Dayan is driven by a significant transference/countertransference love that replays, or repeats, a traumatic past. Already a patient of Dr. Dayan before the attacks, she evokes her feeling of helplessness and aspects of the collective experience of the attacks. The reliving of these various elements in the transference, but also in the countertransference, makes it possible to stage fragments of the unconscious and to put, or at least suggest, words on a collective experience. All this is done without resorting to images, or the technique of flashbacks. For instance, in episode 21, Ariane tells Dayan, after he proposed ending the therapy: 'It's not my father who's keeping me from living—it's you. This relationship is what's destroying me' [our translation].

This extract could be interpreted as an expression of Ariane's transference, re-living feelings of frustration and helplessness from past relational experiences onto her therapist. Simultaneously, it may evoke countertransference reactions in Dayan, potentially triggering personal feelings of responsibility, guilt, or the need to intervene. As we will discuss further in this article, Dayan's acting out with Ariane at the end of the first season can be analysed as a manifestation of an acted-out countertransference, which constitutes an obstacle to the therapeutic process and may even be potentially harmful.

Adel Chibane, a police officer from the Research and Intervention Brigade (BRI) who intervened during the attacks on the Bataclan, seeks a consultation with the primary desire of quickly silencing his intrusive symptoms following the events of November 13. It is only over the course of the sessions, in a relationship of transference/countertransference that is marked by resistance and the repetition of often harsh and hostile affects, that the viewer gradually discovers his personal history – which is itself underpinned by the violences that were perpetrated during the Algerian war. The violence that shaped Chibane's life is reactivated in his sense of helplessness when facing the silence and massacre upon entering the Bataclan with his unit on the night of the attacks. His bodily agitation, rigid posture, abrupt movements during sessions, and urgency to 'have an action plan' [our translation] (episode 2) suggest transference not only onto the analyst but also onto the very structure of the therapeutic setting.

In a text about the totalitarianism of the Second World War, Adorno (2003), argued that extracting oneself from the effects of a collective disaster is partly carried out by means of individuation. This was because, according to Adorno, such contexts comprised the risk of a denial of the individual and their singularity through a form of 'massification' (Adorno, 2003). Admittedly, the contemporary social context in France is not identical, but it is clear that there is today a form of 'authority of the spectacular' (Mondzain, 2007) that may underlie a collective and social discontent. The threat of destructiveness, combined with the impossibility of thinking collectively and individually about certain events that have touched the core of the lives of contemporary subjects, is fuelled by the flow of violent images specific to a society of spectacle (Mondzain, 2007). Furthermore, the various lockdowns consequent upon the Covid-19 pandemic, which were marked by an anxiety-inducing media climate, favoured the isolation of the subjects while increasing their consumption of images. The overflow of information and images seemed to create a divide between the reader's experience and the information being disseminated. Experience, as understood by Benjamin (1939) and described by Manesse

(2013), can be seen as the ‘result of a collaboration between the imagination and the understanding, the outcome of several syntheses. The world touches us through our senses (sensation). Imagination makes a first synthesis, and we perceive the world (empirical consciousness). The understanding then makes a second synthesis, and we experience the world’ [our translation]. Part of today’s ‘discontent’ (Freud, 1930) within society would then reside in that cleavage between the reader/viewer’s experience of isolation and the mass of information disseminated. This is something that leaves little or no room to reflect on events. The events themselves are not actually related; yet they are shown in a sequence of images, without room for analysis of what is latent in those too-easily-accessible images.

Benjamin (1931) also noted a shift in the ‘aura’, which was no longer defined by the technical inability to reproduce images but by the inability to, in the words of Fernandez-Moardi (2006), reproduce the ‘vestiges of the real that it conveys, and the involvement of the spectator confronted with what is shown in the image’ [our translation]. The flow and speed of the outpouring of shocking images, in lieu of reflection, leaves little or no room for narrative, thought, or the processing of experience. *En thérapie* transports us away from this frenzy of images, sequences of fast shots, and spectacular twists underpinned by saturated soundtracks. For that reason, the series offers the spectator a space to think. The portrayal of the self-reflection that the characters experience recalls the collective reflection in which the viewer can recognise themselves. This intermingling of the individual and the collective, in part fuels the interest the series generates. In the second season, Robin, a young boy (the son of Leonora and Damien, a couple in therapy from the first season), presents with a heightened concern about the Covid-19 virus. This concern is initially staged through the compulsive use of masks and hand sanitiser and can then be perceived in the heavy silences intertwined with animated dialogues. Gradually, the character of Robin becomes more nuanced. Behind the mask of the

obsession with Covid-19, emerges a **boy** who is struggling with a pronounced guilt and sadness connected with the divorce of his parents.

In this respect, what happens via this television production is a form of reappropriation of the collective experience, of a narrative through image as well as through fiction, acting, and staging. Richard and Brown (2011) have argued that in our media dominated societies, some media can act as internal objects, allowing a reflective position and offering psychic resources at a cultural level (Bainbridge, 2012).

En thérapie therefore acts as a social mirror, allowing spectator-subjects to initiate a personal reflection by listening and watching the fictional characters evolve along their therapeutic paths. To stage fragments of the unconscious, and snippets of analytical session, the directors have chosen to represent a part of the socio-political scene intertwined with the subjective and relational life of the characters. This strategy has won over viewers, who have identified and projected themselves onto these fictional characters who resemble them and have similar experiences. The experiences that are depicted are ones that are usually hidden, or that are not shown in such a way – especially with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Psychopathology ‘on screen’

It is not uncommon for the madness of those who suffer from serious psychopathological disorders to be represented in cinematographic works. Depictions of patients and certain specific conditions – whether neurotic or psychotic – and reflecting clinical practice, have frequently been shown. To mention only a few examples, we could list: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975), *Taxi Driver* (Scorcese, 1976), *Black Swan* (Darren, 2010), *Shutter Island* (Scorcese, 2010), *Joker* (Phillips, 2019), *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960). Psychic suffering is often represented in a flamboyant way; especially through noisy scenes of psychotic or psychopathic decompensation, which make impulsive outburst and underlying aggressiveness clearly visible. In *En thérapie*, neurosis is at the heart of the series, it exults,

takes centre stage, and plays the lead role. Less visible, less vivid, and less easily perceived than psychosis, neurosis nevertheless raises essential questions because it introduces the human condition with its questions of nuance, and the internal tremors of subjectivity. Neurosis speaks of ambivalence, both in terms of the role of the psychoanalyst and in terms of the role of the patients and their way of inhabiting their characters. The staging of neurosis requires playing not only with the visible, but also – and above all – occupying the register of suggestion, rather than that of depiction. In this sense, the temporality of the series and the subdued atmosphere of the episodes, as well as the framing, make it possible to establish a rhythm that depicts neurosis in motion, with its fluctuations between the normal and the pathological. As mentioned in the introduction, the rhythm of broadcast of the series is different from that of a film, and evokes the frequency of appointments with an analyst.

It is worth emphasising that it is also through the staging of the transference and its analysis or, on the contrary, the acting out (especially in season 1), that the psychoanalyst occupies a very special role. Filmed in the act of listening, he is also shown on screen as the object of the transference of his analysands – a transference that is both a driver and an obstacle to the cure, and for the narrative development of the series. All this being presented from a Freudian perspective. Similarly, the issue of countertransference is raised, and used as an essential element in the scenario. This time interpreted more from a Ferenczian angle (Ferenczi, 1932), with its capacity for finding surprised in the aspect of encounter, the subjectivities of the patients/characters are also staged as something to be harnessed. Countertransference becomes a work tool, something to be thought over and analysed – especially when the psychoanalyst meets with his supervisor. The feelings and experiences of countertransference are also depicted as significant obstacles, ones that, if not sufficiently elaborated on, can lead to a form of acting out, and become a stumbling block for the cure. Thus, the psychoanalyst is not portrayed as a saviour, a hero, or a bearer of knowledge. Endowed with a strong drive, he is both the bringer

of analytical thinking, of attention to the unconscious, while also being the figure of an anti-hero – even anti-analytical when he gives in to his countertransference love to enact it in external reality. Far from a positivist perspective, and a listening focused solely on the symptom, the character of the psychoanalyst Philippe Dayan is imbued with ambivalence. This allows viewers to experience a kind of transference feeling that is itself marked by a sort of ambivalence. Moreover, through his ultimate acting out, with his patient Ariane, the character of the psychoanalyst introduces a reflection on a fundamental dimension of psychoanalysis and care: ethics, the sufficiently secure nature of the framework, and the absolute necessity to think about the latent and the unconscious in both verbal and para-verbal language, not only as a patient but also, and above all, as an analyst.

Regarding the physical setting, nearly all episodes take place in Dayan's practice, except for a weekly session within the fiction's timeline held in the practice of his supervisor. This repetition of setting may reflect the importance of the external frame in therapy, but also the therapist's internal frame (Delourme & Marc, 2014; Winnicott, 1971). During the first season, the only scenes filmed outdoors suggest an internal upheaval for the psychoanalyst. These scenes depict him at memorial sites for the victims of the attacks, at Adel Chibane's funeral, and when visiting his patient Ariane, thus breaking the analytic, therapeutic, ethical, and deontological frame. The actor is extracted from the practice setting whenever the character steps outside the frame or when the latter is violently confronted by an external reality. In the second season, Dayan is seen outside his consultations in lawyers' offices and at the courthouse. This departure from the frame, related to the lawsuit filed against the psychoanalyst by Adel Chibane's father, illustrates ethical and clinical questions brought into dialogue, as well as misunderstandings concerning the therapist's responsibility in his patient's acting out. He is thus compelled to leave the confines of his practice to confront a form of external reality, a societal questioning expressed forcefully.

Furthermore, the presence of masks in the second season is noteworthy. Masks are both an integral part of the set and of the characters' costumes. They convey the intrusion of external reality linked to the pandemic into the sessions, functioning at times almost as transitional objects, at times as contra-phobic supports, and sometimes as obstacles to the exchange. The meaning assigned to the physical setting and the objects placed on stage or used in the analytic scene is also shaped by the filming techniques, framing, and thus by the way an interaction, an intrusion, a sudden outburst, a presence, or an absence is narrated.

Although the character of Adel Chibane dies at the end of the first season after suddenly interrupting his therapy and joining the Kurds in their fight against terrorism, he remains present through the lawsuit filed against Dayan (by Adel's father), thereby questioning not only the therapist's responsibility but also representing a form of social trial of psychoanalysis, its effects, and its scope. It is noteworthy that through Adel's character, diverse reflections are represented—and thus condensed—on screen, ranging from metapsychological and clinical questions to contemporary social issues, through the depiction of a psychotherapy and an interrogation of its outcome. This leads the viewer to 'the most painful examination of the forms of commitment that therapy entails. What do we seek to cure? What assurance do we have of possible healing? Would it even occur?' [our translation] (Cabasso, 2021).

3. The scopic as it is depicted in *En thérapie*, and how it connects to psychoanalysis today.

The collective enthusiasm for *En thérapie* reveals a fascination with what is normally invisible. By opening the door to the psychoanalyst's practice, the series immerses viewers in the confidentiality and intensity of the therapeutic encounter, offering access to scenes that resist spectacularisation. This mobilises the scopic drive while simultaneously exceeding it. In Freudian terms (Freud, 1905), the scopic drive—manifested in seeing, being seen, and seeing oneself—is closely linked to epistemophilic drives and the formative curiosity of

infantile sexuality. The series emphasizes not only what can be seen, but also what remains invisible: the unconscious, subjectivity, and desire, which escape direct visual grasp and are marked by latency and ambivalence. This tension between denial and fascination echoes aspects of the fantasy of the primal scene, oscillating between the refusal of what cannot be seen and the contemporary compulsion to “see everything,” driven by instinctual excitement. In a social context where visibility increasingly serves as proof of existence and recognition, psychoanalysis—focused on the invisible—remains especially vulnerable to suspicion and critique (Freud, 1917, 1923; Lacan, 1957).

Spectators of *En thérapie* occupy a distinct, almost omniscient position. Beyond scopic pleasure, infantile sexual curiosity and epistemophilic desire—the pleasure of knowing, thinking, and mentally elaborating—are activated. The viewer observes all sessions as well as the analyst’s solitary and supervisory moments, creating a privileged, panoptic knowledge that surpasses that of any character. The series’ success thus stems in part from this combination of scopic and epistemophilic stimulation, reinforced by a slow rhythm and extended temporality that allow each patient the time necessary to engage the viewer’s desire to understand.

The fantasy of seeing everything harks back to a desire to better control what happens in the external world and illustrates the confusion between seeing and knowing. For Mireille Berton (2016), as for Foucault (1975), the scopic drive is expressed in society through a form of panopticism that is associated with three types of fantasies, namely: the fantasy of ubiquity (being everywhere simultaneously), the surveillance fantasy, and the fantasy of omniscience. The confusion between seeing and knowing thus seems exacerbated by these various fantasies at work in the contemporary subject. The voyeuristic/exhibitionist dimension, and the excitement played out in and through the visual image, questions the place of the invisible in today’s society. This echoes the theory that Debord set forth in 1967 that ‘The spectacle is not

a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord, 1994, p. 12). Moreover, it underlines a logic of power within a disciplinary society, making panopticon surveillance a defining principle. These remarks make it possible to grasp the extent to which a potential '[current] discontent in culture' is unfolding and indicates how this could be relevant to psychoanalysis and the analyst's place in today's society. If the entanglement of the visible and the invisible is already being played out away from the television screen, the series *En thérapie* stages it while also fomenting a potential transitional space with the audience.

This analysis highlights the existence of a desire, or even a need, among contemporary subjects to re-tell and re-weave their narrative through media, while at the same time transcending the register of the *simply* visible. This may echo the observations of Richards and Brown (2011), with their hypothesis that 'therapy culture' is an essential feature of late modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Berman, 2002; Giddens, 1992; Lasch, 1984). Therapeutic culture or therapy culture can be briefly defined as a widespread cultural trend that gives significant room to a vocabulary, imagery, and representations that are tinged with the semantic field of therapy and feelings. This can range from the popularisation of psychoanalytic ideas as an integral part of the counterculture of the 1960s (Bainbridge & Yates, 2011), to a form of 'psychologisation' of social scripts (Bainbridge, 2012). Füredi (2004) takes a critical look at therapy culture, seeing it as a potential channel for formatting and manipulating subjectivities. Leader (2011), meanwhile, proposes viewing therapy culture as representative of contemporary concerns, encouraging the subject toward a reflective position. In the case of *En thérapie*, it is possible to explain the enthusiasm of its viewers according to the analyses of Leader (2011) and Richards and Brown (2011), namely, as an element in a search for connections, as a space for elaborations by, for, and despite a society numbed by the visual.

4. Images and narratives beyond the scopic

The scopic economy at work in *En thérapie* sheds some light on an aspect of the success it has achieved. But beyond the pervasiveness of this modality of drive, the series also aims to represent and relate some individual and collective questions that are posed by subjects and contemporary society. Manuella de Luca (2020) argues that ‘image’ is not limited to the visual and the scopic, it ‘is enmeshed in the instinctual life, it mobilises it in its twofold valence of affect and representation’ (de Luca, 2020, p.370). In that regard, the image can be a meeting point between the visible and the invisible. In *En thérapie*, the image becomes an element that contributes to narrative and connection, for a visually over-stimulated society with little or no space to think individually and collectively. More importantly, intimate issues are linked to collective traumas, such as the 2015 attacks or the Covid-19 health crisis. These traumatic events are addressed through narrative, and not only in images.

En thérapie not only stages the characters’ thoughts, the snippets of their unconscious, it also allows a form of ‘transitionality’ between the spectators, the fictional characters, the actors, and the directors. The visual aspect of *En thérapie* transcends seeing to re-establish connections between individuals, as well as between their subjective experience and the characters’ narratives. This creates an unexpected space for listening and reflection. In addition to the images, the fictionalisation has made it possible to relay questions and experiences that are conveyed by the fictional characters. *En thérapie* attempts to give form to the contradiction highlighted by Debord (1994) between the image and the story. This tension translates into images by way of scenarios where the characters reveal themselves as different to the way in which they appear. This tension is strengthened by visibility and predictability, it plays with the power of surveillance in which the viewer has the illusion of being engaged.

It seems necessary to open a brief parenthesis here about ‘image’ – the pictorial art in both cinema and, before that, photography – in order to better understand the representation of

psychoanalytic psychotherapy on screen. We must explore the dialectic between the visible and the invisible in this field. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) stated that ‘the depths of memory in dreams also include pictures of people, things, localities and events dating from the earliest times’ (Freud, 1900). Both Freud and Lacan have repeatedly equated various types of optical devices, including the camera, with the psychic apparatus (Barreau, 2016). Photographic activity might be compared to dream activity. Photographic technique evokes a way of accessing the unconscious, not because of the result obtained (the final image), but rather how that image is created (the transformation of reality through the act of photographing, the choice of framing, the revealing of the latent image) and its reading (what it reveals and triggers in the viewer). The potential of photography to *reveal* allows the observer to discover elements not visible to the naked eye. This potential led Benjamin (1931) to evoke the idea of an ‘optical unconscious’ (p.7) in contrast with the instinctual unconscious, thus making photography resonate with psychoanalysis. We also observe in the idea of *punctum* proposed by Barthes (1980), a link between the visible and the invisible that makes the photographic image a surface onto which to project, as well as a potential gash in the psychic apparatus. Photography reveals something that is of the order of the ineffable, evoking a sliver of the unconscious and therefore of the invisible. In this sense, it is possible to consider photography as a transitional space and object.

Over the centuries, the history of art has testified to the centrality of the human subject and their emotions in the production of paintings, sculptures, and the visual arts in general. An exhibition at the Musée Marmottan (Paris) in 2022, entitled *Le théâtre des émotions* [The theatre of the emotions], which dealt with emotions transcribed by and in the visual arts, was an eloquent example of this. In the press kit to the exhibition, one reads that the objective for presenting the works was to retrace the evolution of the representation of affects, by making use of the image ‘as an attempt at symbolisation’, and then ‘as an attempt at exploration’, or

even as a scientific medium. The image shows, but it also allows the artist to project and the viewer to capture elements, representations, and affects that would hardly be visible otherwise than captured and put at the centre of a work. Quite clearly, this brings to mind Winnicott's concept of a transitional object (1971). With regard to the televisual image, it seems interesting to refer to Bainbridge (2012) who, following Silverstone (1994), suggested seeing television as a transitional phenomenon, in the Winnicottian sense of the term. Bainbridge and Silverstone put forward the hypothesis that television contributed to the construction of the identity of subjects, enabling an initial experience of symbolisation, play, and therefore creativity. *En thérapie* is part of this transitional phenomenon, by its form and its content. It allows for identifying: through the performance of the actors, the staging of a collective unease, and of intimate, while at the same time universal, issues. The term 'play' is here to be understood not only as *acting*, but also – perhaps above all – as *playing*; therefore creating and underpinning psychic work and elaboration (Winnicott, 1971).

The pictorial image, but also the televisual image (if, it is part of a narrative) can represent the possibility of an encounter, a link between the artist and the viewer. Here, the question of the gaze appears to be central. For Merleau-Ponty (1964), painting possessed a 'magical power' that brought together the various dimensions of being, in a new space. This gave the image the potentiality to reveal a part of the invisible. Finally, the contribution of Lacanian theory (Lacan, 1981), with its insistence on not reducing the gaze to mere 'sight', has been fundamental. The still image is anchored in the scopic, but transcends it through the gaze that creates it and that then rests on it. It is a suggestion of an encounter, a transitional space that allows the invisible to unfold without being seen.

Returning to the focus of our exploration, in the series *En thérapie*, images, above all, go beyond simple seeing. They make it possible to stage the unconscious, and to share a contemporary form of analytical work with the audience.

Deleuze (1983), talking about the moving image, and Weyl (2015) in the case of cinema and the gaze, open several avenues of reflection relevant to our argument. Weyl argues that the meeting of psychoanalysis and cinema allows not an overlapping view, but two different perspectives. These are perspectives that are articulated around and directed towards the entanglement of the visible and the invisible. Through movement, and the multiplicity of views that are directed at it (those of the director, those of the audience, those of the actors on themselves) a space seems to be created for the invisible. Cinema relies on the visible image, and it is through the gaze meeting movement, that the invisible seems to be able to occupy space, and the unconscious can be heard and staged. For Weyl (2015), psychoanalysis and cinema come together because they act as a magnifying glass that perceives what is invisible to the naked eye. *En thérapie* appears to have acted in a similar way, it exists through images, through the visible, and creates a space for thought, a magnifying glass turned towards what cannot be seen with the eyes alone. In that sense, it is possible to interpret *En thérapie*, as well as the series *BeTipul* and *In Treatment*, as transitional phenomena.

This television series can be thought of as a transitional phenomenon in the Winnicottian sense. It is an intermediary space, where the viewer engages in a libidinal and projective investment in the story, bringing about a juncture between psychic reality and external reality through the fiction represented on the screen. Like play, *En thérapie* stages an oscillation between psychic reality, external reality, and social reality. ‘Neither inside nor outside’, play lays the foundations for cultural experience (Winnicott, 1971a, p. 89), and is thus a form of symbolization. This space, between the inside and the outside, is illustrated in the series through the alternation of shots inside Dr. Dayan’s office, and glimpses (brief in season 1, longer in season 2) of the outside world. Season 1, in particular, is punctuated by shots whose main focus is the window of the psychoanalyst’s office. Through it he sees his patients before and after a

session, glimpsing snippets of their external realities. The viewer sees him looking, while also seeing what he is looking at. ‘Neither inside nor outside’ an intermediary space is thus staged.

5. When affects and the unconscious are shaped by fiction

In *En thérapie*, fragments of the unconscious staged through actions, and personal and collective reflections are put front of stage. These, by definition invisible, elements take shape through the fictional narrative, and the characters who embody it. The Latin etymology of the word ‘fiction’ (*fictio*) points to ‘fashioning’ or ‘shaping’. According to Gomez-Mango (2011, p.109), ‘we can interpret “fiction” as a Freudian nodal point, an interlacing where natural sciences and culture, art and philosophy, as well as psychoanalysis, can meet’ [our translation]. It is through this encounter that projections and identifications become possible for the audience. These then promote the creation of connections between the viewer’s subjective experience and that of the characters in the series. On the relationship between the unconscious, stage direction, and storytelling – when it relates to theatre – Assoun writes,

The position of the spectator is modified: the neurotic is by definition enamoured of dramas. They want to be told, better still shown, a story; an alienated and joyous projection of their own story, refracted by fantasy, which we know to be itself a scenography. This is a predilection that the neurotic will bring to the analytic cure, where they will betray their enjoyment of dramatic self-portrayal. In wanting to “act [their] passions” (Freud, 1912) they will experience the story of their own drama. (Assoun, 2006, p.30) [our translation]

Although *En thérapie* is not a theatre play, Assoun’s theories shed light on some aspects of our reflection around the processes that make it possible to show the invisible part of the psychotherapeutic process by way of a TV series. The psychoanalytical and the theatrical may initially seem antithetical. The theatrical scene is public, the drama is played out by way of visible elements. The psychoanalytic scene on the other hand, is inhabited by the invisible and

the unconscious. The former is a place in part made up of tangible elements. The latter is all about experience and psychic reality. However, it is through their capacity to rekindle the past, to reawaken affects and conflicts, that these two scenes come together. *En thérapie* operates in a similar way, the series allows viewers as individuals to identify with the characters, while at the same time telling a collective story. The fact of being serialised, through its temporality, its rhythm, the link between the characters, the transfer played out, and the affects projected onto the characters, is itself part of a transitional dynamic. Winnicott situates the transitional phenomenon in the cultural experience (Winnicott, 1971c), which itself supports the continuity of the self and promotes psychic elaboration. This entanglement gradually takes shape as the fictional characters interact and evolve, not only individually but also with each other.

6. *En thérapie*, or the soundscape of the clinical encounter

The dialogues and topics covered in *En thérapie* punctuate the on-screen representation of a fiction inhabited by the invisible. In addition to these aspects, the sound atmosphere and voices contribute to the storytelling, the staging of psychopathology, and the psychology of the characters. Sound ‘evokes’ without ‘saying’, it contributes to the form of the series and gives meaning to the content. Gillie (2010) considers the voice not only as sound but also as the hallmark of the drives, as it redirects the other (the listener) *to* their listening, ‘It is the words of the Other that “seeks out” its “audience” and resonates with their own “tropism” of jouissance’ (Assoun, 1995, in Gillie, 2010, p.130) [our translation]. Here, a parallel with the function of the voices of the characters in the series *En thérapie* can be made. As is often mentioned by journalists when they interviewed the actor Frédéric Pierrot who plays the psychoanalyst Philippe Dayan, his voice seems to generate a massive transference by the audience onto the character in the series – and beyond that onto the actor himself. In *En thérapie*, the soundscape – that manifold creation that includes the visual, the characters, and the acting – takes shape through various elements. From the music of the credits to the muffled

sounds of Dr. Dayan's office, via the sounds of doors, steps on the pavement, the floorboards creaking, rustling of fabrics, muffled music from the street, whispers, so many sound elements that together create an atmosphere, a sound backdrop that is both discreet and essential. Lecourt (2003) interprets noise as a form of 'proto-communication', a potential way of creating a group psychological-cocoon. Viewed in that way, the sound atmosphere of the series creates a cocoon that envelops the spectators.

By immersing the audience in a soundscape that creates a feeling of psychic cocooning, the sound atmosphere fosters their identification with the characters, and thereby their connection to them and by extension their interest for the series. 'Myths and religions both affirm it, sound is the great mediator between the gods and men' (Lecourt, 2003, p.41). These words echo those of Serres (1982) for whom noise is primeval, in the sense that it predates distinct voices and language. Serres argues 'background sound is perhaps the basis of a being' (Serres, 1982, p.32) [our translation]. The soundscape of the series would thus enable the audience to immerse themselves in the space and time granted to the invisible and enable formations of the unconscious; those formation being one aspect of the analytical work that goes beyond the visual and dialogues.

Conclusion

In today's western society, which is marked by a frenzy of images and mass consumerism, and where there is no space for narrative, the series *En thérapie* (just like *BeTipul* and *In Treatment*) stands out among the majority of other television productions. The core concept – to put into images and narrative the psychoanalytic process, and what is invisible in that process – supposes a break with the current high-speed outpouring of images. At the same time, the series must also meet an overarching criterion in the world of television, that of being entertainment, or, at the very least, of arousing the interest of viewers. Having become a fashion

phenomenon, *En thérapie* seems to have managed to both honour said criterion and represent aspects of the invisible unconscious that are manifest in the analytical process.

That a television series should aim to make a screenplay out of elements of metapsychology, might initially appear antinomic. However, the content (the story, the dialogues, the scenarios) and the form (the rhythm, the soundscape, and the choice of images and shots) seem to have achieved a unique relationship. This is particularly so in the case of the images which, as we have seen, embody a possible point of convergence between the invisible unconscious and the visible, when those images come with a space and time for reflection. It is in fact by way of the visible that *En thérapie* first generated interest – something that may seem at first contradictory to the intent of the French version of the series, whose aim is to narrate the psychoanalytic process. Indeed, the reasons of the enthusiasm for this television series appear to be numerous. The scopic drive brings about some of the pleasure in watching the series; this then evolves into something more epistemophilic, there is a curiosity to see, but above all there is a desire to know and understand. The rhythm of the series – marked by a relative slowness and shots that give importance to the expressions of the characters – exacerbate this curiosity. It is no longer just a case of seeing what is out-of-bounds or of scrutinising the confidentiality and privacy of a psychoanalyst's office. Perhaps almost in spite of themselves, through the union of substance and form, curious viewers find themselves included in the psychoanalytic journeys that is being staged.

Showing, on screen and in a contemporary way the invisible of the analytical process requires there to be an encounter with the spectators. That encounter does not occur through a massive overflowing of images, maintained by an accelerated rhythm and a proliferation of successive shots and twists, it happens through a gradual, slow, weaving of connections between the audience and the characters, and by way of a shared reflection on a contemporary malaise that is known and experienced by all the spectators. Furthermore, the staging of

psychopathology demonstrates a continuum between the normal and the pathological as well as within pathology itself and its structures. This gives room for an expression and exploration of what cannot usually be told in a society where suffering, if it is to be expressed, can only be expressed by way of the spectacular. It is possible that the combination of scopic pleasure, stimulation of infantile curiosity, and the creation and narration of a collective psychic cocoon that brings together characters and spectators, has underpinned the success of the series. We can say that *En thérapie* illustrates Merleau-Ponty's idea that the visible and the invisible are not contradictory but hinge upon each other, in an entanglement where one brings to mind the other.

Conflict of interest declaration

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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