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“NORMAL PEOPLE”: HOW A TV SHOW ROCKED THE IRISH PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN...

Carol Owens

Normality, Freud remarked in 1937, is an ideal fiction. I am going to speak this morning about the TV adaptation of the book “Normal People” by Irish author Sally Rooney, a piece of fiction, which has been idealised in numerous ways. Directed by Oscar nominated Irish director Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie McDonald, the show was aired two nights apart on RTE1 and BBC3 six weeks into the Irish lockdown. The series competed with the BBC 9 O’ clock news for audiences anxious to hear the latest on the Coronavirus, giving BBCThree its best ever week on iPlayer with requests up to 21 million, while on RTÉ Player it garnered over 3 million views again breaking the highest previous record. In his recent book *Pandemic!* Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has advocated that right now we should gladly succumb to all our guilty movie and TV pleasures, himself confessing a preference for dark Scandinavian—preferably Icelandic—crime series. In Ireland, not only were we holding our breath for the next episode in the series, we were also writing about it in the Newspapers, on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and talking about it on the radio, on zoom calls with friends and loved ones in forbidden zones, and in psychoanalytic sessions. According to CNN columnist Jill Caddell Normal People was irresistible viewing for abnormal times. Nice tagline. But what was so special about Normal People, and why did the series attract so much attention during these Abnormal times?

Abnormal Times/Normal People.

Even in a pandemic, human beings try to establish what constitutes normality. And since our encounters with Covid-19, in our various locations, we have been grasping at and striving towards something we call a ‘new normal’. New normal described the restrictions of our routines and habits. It was normal to crave our new normal routine, when none other was available; it was normal to complain about it, suffer from its exigencies, and even normal to take some satisfaction in the knowledge that, as far as anyone knew, this new normal covered everyone and everything. It was *a normality*, in the sense of Freud’s ideal fiction that created the fantasmatic notion that all things were equal under the sun, and the Corona virus. We were all restricted, and we came to like and take comfort in the non-fathomless rule of an Other that told us how to survive, and stay safe. For us in Ireland, a little phrase in Irish on the top right hand corner of the TV screen: Fan Sa bhaile, Stay at Home, like a benevolent superego, finally, telling us what to do, but politely! We were all – apparently – “in the same boat”, a kind of dystopian paradise. Even Zizek for once blinkered by the obvious ideological ramifications admits to enjoying the boat-trip.

In general, psychoanalysts don’t find the concept of normality particularly useful in a clinical sense. Who among us in the course of a session has not been addressed by the client halted in the flow of her own speech to ask; am I normal? Is that normal? We tend to agree that what counts for abnormal with respect to social and psychiatric norms is only of interest since it condenses in the form of a symptom, something which is addressed to the Other and contains aspects of the particular subject’s relationship to the Other based upon a system of signifiers, and the subject’s own particular knotting of Real, Symbolic, and

Imaginary. We also tend to believe that melancholic nostalgia for the past, even if it was the new normal of last week, or the old normal before Covid, is, rather like the mourning for the lost object, itself predicated upon a fantasy of return to a more glorious time, and as such, veiling of the function of that object, as cause of desire.

Speaking of which, to put the scale of the success of *Normal People* into a bit of context, even the neck chain worn by actor Paul Mespil in the role of Conor throughout the series had an Instagram account of its own. The chain was auctioned off after the series finished and raised 70,000euro for Pieta House – an Irish organisation that supports people who are in suicidal distress, or who engage in self-harm, and people who are bereaved by suicide. What, you might be wondering, could be the link between a neck chain and suicide, aside from the obvious and rather unfortunate synonym - choker.

Normal Times/Abnormal People

Normal People is in fact a story about the ideology of normality, the pressure to be normal, the appearance of normal, and the suffering, poor mental health, and sometimes suicide, constituted by not managing to get to normality. This set of motifs is woven into the text, primarily in relation to the sexual relationship between a young man and woman – Conor and Marianne - from rural Ireland. Conor is a popular jock hiding a bright mind from his peers for fear of losing face, she is an outspoken, sharply intelligent, excluded loner, unpopular and unlikeable. He comes from a working class background, and lives with his single mother in a council house; she lives in a mansion with her emotionally detached lawyer mother, and her brother who bullies her relentlessly. Conor's mother cleans house for Marianne's mother. The story follows Conor and Marianne in their last few months of secondary school in rural Sligo, and their college years at Trinity College in Dublin following the curves and contours of what Lacan would call the non-sexual rapport of their relationship, the many misunderstandings, the awkward and funny encounters where something very special takes place, the long explicit sex scenes, the times spent apart when Marianne was on an Erasmus year in Sweden and when Conor had to return to Sligo in the summers to work, and finally, ultimately, the inevitable parting of their ways. As a TV adaptation of a really great novel, it fares quite well. And it is probable that it would have garnered a lot of attention whenever it would have aired on TV. But, it wasn't any old time when it did air, it was six weeks into a pandemic lockdown, and the Irish were transfixed.

The newspaper headlines punctuated the lockdown in the style of Lacanian equivoques: "Longest sex scene ever to air on Irish television"; "Its Marianne's fault we can't get a government to satisfy *Normal People*"; "Why *Normal People*'s depiction of depression is so groundbreaking". So first there was the sex, or better said, first there was the intimacy. Yes, the bishops were fainting, and the teenagers were cringing, and the sex scenes got posted on Pornhub, and yes, amazingly it was the first time on Irish TV that a post-coital full-frontal naked man was on view. But the real intimacy that was captured and captivated the hearts of the locked down Irish was in the scenes where Conor and Marianne are not together physically, but virtually, where Conor unable to sleep because of anxiety is kept company by Marianne on skype, where he goes to bed with Marianne's face on the laptop screen beside him. Bear in mind, this is a pre-Covid production, but it spoke to millions of viewers who, separated from their loved ones, could only, like Conor and Marianne, "keep the skype on". It spoke too to the many clients and analysands who chose to continue their therapies and

analyses on screen, laptop, smartphone, and to speak about just that moment of peculiar serendipity in their sessions feeling like Marianne, keeping the skype on!

At the time of the lockdown and for many months into it, we in Ireland had no government, the general election had resulted in a division of the electorate, with Sinn Fein, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail holding almost equal votes. The talks that needed to take place in order for the parties to deliberate and negotiate only came to an end in late June with a coalition formed of FG, FF and the Green Party, and Sinn Fein in opposition. What this meant was that all sorts of things took place during the Irish lockdown which pre-Covid were politically impossible. First, the generous Covid payments for all people who were unable to work because of the lockdown, second the blurring of private and public healthcare as the private hospitals were taken over by the health service for beds and ICU units, and third, the homeless were homed. Sally Rooney, author of NP is a Marxist. So NP is a Marxist love story. Conor and Marianne are most definitely not in the same boat. Rather like Leo and Kate in Titanic, they cannot both survive clinging onto the fragment of the boat; as Zizek put it in his critique of that film, the real of class struggle made it impossible for the couple to live happily ever after; from a Lacanian perspective, the real of the impossibility of the sexual relationship is covered over and masked by the material pre-conditions of the relationship. In NP, Conor goes home to Sligo to work after the first year of college while Marianne goes travelling; later they both win scholarships in Trinity, which Marianne receives as an ego boost but which makes it possible for Conor to visit Europe and spend time in art galleries; later later, Conor will probably have to emigrate to find work as it will be cheaper for him to buy a house in a different country than to buy one in Dublin. This is a rough sketch, but you get the picture. Well, actually, we all got the picture! These themes brought home to the Irish in lockdown, everything that is rotten in the Irish economy, and because in lockdown the things we were told were never possible, suddenly became possible, made us think, hey, what if these impossible things were possible after all? Hence, Marianne's fault it took the Government so long to form.

And, finally, depression. I can't go into the long history of repression and stigma over the experience and treatment of mental illness in Ireland, but the themes of depression, anxiety, and suicide in Normal People shouted out to the millions of Irish who pre-Covid and during Covid have suffered poor mental health and had to suffer, largely in silence. In addition, and not surprisingly, the themes of loneliness and isolation resonated for so many viewers, and Conor's seeking out and entering into therapy to manage his depression and loss of his best friend who died by suicide has been hailed and applauded by all of the major organisations who are involved in mental health care both in Ireland and the UK. In Ireland, men are four times more likely to die by suicide than women. That this is a fact that can now be stated is already an achievement. Normal People plays a significant role in questioning this statistic.

Inevitably, the series also inspired the contents of the Irish Times travel and culture pages, - in times of lockdown, travel with Conor and Marianne to Italy, or with Marianne to Sweden. The sets and scenes appeared in the pages of the property porn columns, whose fabulous house in Rathgar, which amazing residence in Sligo, who was the decorator, the architect, and so on. And, last but not least, Trinity college applications are way up this year, even though not a single normal person can actually attend lectures on campus.