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## **“That’s Because of the Trauma”: Repetition, Reflection and Refraction in Social Media in Louise O’Neill’s *Asking for It* (2015)**

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### **Abstract**

This essay will look at different modes of trauma that are represented in Louise O’Neill’s novel *Asking For It* (2015). These modes of trauma will be looked at in terms of how the repeated visualization and production of an initial act of violence and rape across social media platforms actively transforms post-traumatic stress into a repeated and ongoing sense of traumatic stress which has profound implications for the sense of selfhood and identity of the protagonist of the novel Emma O’Donovan. Emma is not remembering a repressed experience; she is re-living it virtually in the present as the images are both present and future, as she knows there will be more images and more comments when she turns on her phone. The initial act of rape, which is extremely traumatic, is never actually in the past in the book, as a series of graphic images of Emma’s body, in all stages of abjection, are continuously circulating on social media meaning that there is never a stage of post-traumatic experience, as these images circulate in the present so it is as if the whole process is on a loop which has no end, and cannot ever be dealt with. It is an important book in dealing with the epistemological and subjective impact of social media on senses of the self and of subjectivity. Lacanian theory and the work of Cathy Caruth, Laura Mulvey and Julia Kristeva will be used as lenses through which to read these issues.

### **Keywords**

Trauma; reflection; image; mirror stage; identity; Lacan; Mulvey

### **Mirror, mirror on the wall**

My mother’s face appears in the mirror beside my own, bright red lips on powdered skin.

Her hair is still in its neat bob despite the sticky heat. She gets it done every Saturday. “I deserve a treat,” she says as she leaves the house. “I don’t care how expensive it is.”

Karen Hennessy gets her hair blow-dried three times a week. She never mentions the cost.

I'm flushed, patches of red breaking out on my cheeks, the greying vest top I wore to bed sticking to me. I look from her face to mine.

You're so like your mother, people always say. You're the image of her.

"Morning," she says. "What are you doing, just staring at yourself in the mirror?" She frowns at my chest, at where the nipples are outlined through the sweat-stained fabric.

"Nothing," I say as I wrap my arms over them. "What do you want?"<sup>1</sup>

These are the opening lines of Louise O'Neill's novel *Asking For It*, as we see how both mother and daughter are ideologically enculturated to look their best in order to receive the male gaze. It is a Young Adult novel, and as Jennifer Mooney notes, this genre is "a powerful and as yet unresearched site of rich literary and cultural significance,"<sup>2</sup> a point with which I would agree. That we first see them as images in a mirror is highly significant as they are looking at themselves as they look to be looked at. The aim of a woman is to be attractive and pretty and popular, and it is a message which Emma O'Donovan, the narrator and daughter in the book, has taken on board. She is attractive, popular, and very much the alpha-female of her group, who, in the book's first section is in control of her image among her peers and on social media and carefully curates both to retain her position. However, at the end of the opening section, Emma is raped and then has images of that rape spread across social media and becomes an object of ridicule and abjection because of these pictures and images. She attempts to bring charges against her rapists, and suffers strong social ostracization as a result, which sees her whole community turn against her as she becomes something of a *cause célèbre*: the "Ballinacoom Girl" (*AFI*, 110). The following lines close the book:

I make eye contact with the girl in the mirror. I stand up, pulling down the leggings, and take the hoodie off, watching the pale body standing there in just a bra and knickers.

I touch the girl's breasts.

Fuck, Emma O'Donovan's tits are tiny though. I thought they'd be way better than that.

I turn around.

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<sup>1</sup> Louise O'Neill, *Asking For It* (London: Quercus, 2015), 8. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in text with the abbreviation *AFI*.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Mooney, *Feminist Discourse in Irish Literature* (London: Routledge, 2022), 11.

Her ass looks good though.

"Emma?" My mother's voice floats up from downstairs. "Emmie, where are you?"

"In my bedroom."

"Come down, will you? I want to talk to you."

I take a deep breath, then another one. In. *One. Two. Three.* Out. *One. Two. Three.*

I get dressed, covering that body up.

I stare at my reflection.

I look normal. I look like a good girl.

"Emmie?" my mother calls again.

"I'm coming," I say. "I'll be down now."

And I walk downstairs, dragging my mouth into a smile so that I can look normal. It's important that I look normal now. It's important that I look like a good girl (*AFI*, 196).

This framing of the narrative by two mirrors is a significant index of the importance of reflection and images in terms of the creation of identity: Emma's first glimpse of herself; her last glimpse of herself; and her first glimpse of her mother, is in the mirror. To see an image of oneself is, in terms of the theory of Jacques Lacan, a necessary part of self-knowledge, and of the creation of self-identity, and in this text, this is especially true of female identity. In *Asking For It*, images and reflections are foundational in terms of the creation of a positive sense of self, and also seminal in the traumatic sense of the abject self that we see after Emma's rape, and more specifically in terms of the ongoing social media representations of that rape. Hence, in the book, the word "mirror" appears 29 times; the word "picture" appears 15 times; the word "reflection" appears 7 times; the word "image" appears 8 times; while the word "photo" appears 129 times. This constellation of focus on visual embodied images of the person underscore, at a textual level, the increased significance of the importance of our bodily image to our sense of our own subjectivity.

Laura Mulvey has pioneered theorizations of the visual objectification of women in contemporary culture, and has also teased out how, female identity is often created, and in many ways shaped, by what she terms the "male gaze." For Mulvey, "women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another," but what they see is shaped very much by male desire and by the male gaze, as opposed to their own "unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires"; they are being turned all the time into "objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by

men.”<sup>3</sup> She goes on to extrapolate that women are not seen as subjects but rather as objects, noting that they are just the background for male achievement, and deemed to be of value only if they are desirable and attractive. She further suggests that scopophilia, the pleasure of looking,<sup>4</sup> is a shaping societal agency in that it helps to create the desirable objects of the gaze. For Mulvey, the gaze is active, hegemonic and shaping through a broadly patriarchal ideology that tends to interpellate women into objects of male desire from an early stage.

Another theorist, Julia Kristeva, suggests that images can also provide a negative sense of ourselves, what, in *Powers of Horror*, she terms “abjection.” She makes the point that when the:

object of desire bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence.<sup>5</sup>

This is what happens when Emma engages with the images of herself that are plastered all over the internet, what she sees are images of her own fear that “runs along its edges”<sup>6</sup> of the connection between her image and its reality: what she now sees is not the beautiful and desirable woman in control, but an “it” and abject image of powerlessness and shame.

Mulvey’s work follows the Lacanian theory of “The Mirror Stage,”<sup>7</sup> which is often assumed to be patriarchal, especially given the use of male pronouns in its explanation, “the little man is at the *infans* stage,”<sup>8</sup> and much of the theorizing of the male gaze derives from Lacan. One of his core points is that the image in the mirror “is the most evanescent of objects, since it only

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures (Language, Discourse, Society)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, “A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume 7*, eds. James and Anna Freud Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 157.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 38

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, Bruce Fink trans. in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 75-81.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 76.

appears there in the margins.”<sup>9</sup> As Lacan makes clear here, the developing ego is part of an ongoing dialectical structure involving the mirror, the baby and the person holding the baby. The identification that takes place when the subject “assumes [*assume*] an image,”<sup>10</sup> is all part of this broader structure. For Lacan, this structure is both fragile and fictional and it situates the agency of the ego “prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction,”<sup>11</sup> which means that there is always an element of the imaginary involved, and also that the teleology of our fictional ego, and consequently our sense of selfhood, is always validated by the other.

This “other” is a complex term in Lacanian theory and is divided into two areas, one using the capital letter while the other uses the lower case one (“Other/other”). The little other (“other”) is the other who is not really other, but a “reflection and projection of the ego”: it is simultaneously the “counterpart and the specular image.”<sup>12</sup> The big Other (“Other”) designates “radical alterity, an other-ness,” which “cannot be assimilated through identification,” and Lacan equates this radical alterity with “language and the law.”<sup>13</sup> This Other, which is both a gaze and a locus of desire, can change and when it changes, so too will our sense of selfhood. Lacan also postulates a sense of aggression between the image in the mirror, which is coherent and whole, and the inchoate baby, held in the arms of a parent, who is aspiring to identify with this image, so we can add negative feelings to this fluid and changing dialectical structure of selfhood.

## Beauty and Power

So how one looks is central, epistemologically and even ontologically, to who one is, according to Lacan and Mulvey, and this is very clear in *Asking For It*, where the terms “look”; “looking” and “looked” appear a total of 352 times. Images of how the self is constructed are very important in this book, as Emma’s sense of selfhood is completely connected with images of herself:

Ali has tagged me in a photo on Instagram, a selfie of the four of us at the match captioned “Me and my girls, fresh as fuck.”

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 136.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 135.

I look at the photo closely. I'm definitely the prettiest out of the four of us ... (AFI, 37).

... I check my phone, sending Maggie a Snapchat, taking a selfie and posting it on Instagram, snorting when Matt Reynolds comments on the photo asking for a tit pic (AFI, 57).

Beauty and attractiveness are what make her special, and the words "beauty/beautiful" appear 29 times, while the word "pretty" appears 20 times. The text establishes beauty as the locus of female power, what Naomi Wolf has termed "beauty thinking" which "urges women to approach one another as possible adversaries until they know they are friends."<sup>14</sup> Wolf sees the beauty myth as dividing women from each other as they compete, consciously or unconsciously, for the male gaze, and if this means starving their bodies or wearing uncomfortable shoes, then it is a price worth paying. According to Wolf:

Rivalry, resentment, and hostility provoked by the beauty myth run deep ... It is painful for women to talk about beauty because under the myth, one woman's body is used to hurt another. Our faces and bodies become instruments for punishing other women, often used out of our control and against our will.<sup>15</sup>

Emma Donovan is beautiful, and this is her unique feature in the book: "You look beautiful this morning, Emmie. As always" (AFI, 10), notes her mother, who sees beauty as the key to success in a young woman's life, as Widdows puts it "identification of the self with the body is not a denial of subjectivity, but rather a reconstruction of subjectivity located in, and symbolized by, the body."<sup>16</sup> Being attractive takes work and effort, and to attract the male gaze is the work of a woman, so this opening scene would suggest.

## The traumatic gaze

Here Emma controls and collates the gaze of the Other, and the masculine gaze of which Mulvey speaks. Her rape, but more especially, the consequences of the images of that rape, will shatter this control, and its traumatic effects are huge. Cathy Caruth's work in this area is significant as she argues that trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation: "As with

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<sup>14</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), 75.

<sup>15</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 284.

<sup>16</sup> Widdows, *Perfect Me*, 187.

rumour, there is a 'truth' at the heart of every fiction,"<sup>17</sup> and in the case of loss and trauma, this fictional truth is often less susceptible to denial and displacement than more realistic narratives of trauma. Literature allows for the expression of those gaps and silences, it allows for the Freudian notion of the "return of the repressed" in terms of that fictive truth of which Caruth spoke. In attempting to work through grief, loss and trauma, often the fictional and the aesthetic can be the most accessible form of "talking cure" that is available. This is because human reaction to loss is not confined to the rational or the cognitive domains: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing,"<sup>18</sup> and for Freud, the human being is defined by the conflation of the body and mind; of the rational and the instinctual. His core point, that the somatic is also a valuable source of knowledge about living in the world, is one that has particular value in this discussion. The word "Trauma," etymologically, derives from the term "wound," and for Freud, "the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind."<sup>19</sup>

For Caruth, the story of trauma, both the story told and the story interpreted, far from being "an escape from reality" is rather an attestation "to its endless impact on a life":

Is the trauma death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between *a crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.<sup>20</sup>

For Emma, the process is different and because she is very much caught up in what Arjun Appadurai terms mediascapes, as the single event which is usually seen as the locus and cause of trauma is less so for Emma, as she actually has no memory of it. Mediascapes are "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality," which offer "a series of elements ... out of which scripts can be formed" which "help to constitute narrative of the

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<sup>17</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Caruth, *Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Caruth, *Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 7.



Other.”<sup>21</sup> It is such a mediascape that causes her trauma as much as the physical act of rape. She wakes up, sunburnt, having been left on the steps of her house with no memory of what happened.

Either she has repressed unconsciously all of the details of what happened to her, or the potent mixture of alcohol and drugs that she took and was given at the party have obliterated her memory. In the aftermath of a drunken and drug-filled party, Emma has little enough recollection of having sex with Paul O'Brien, a significantly older GAA star. She finds herself with “bruises blossoming around my neck and hips,” and her vaginal area is “chafed, red raw, the same pattern of bruising dotted on my inner thighs.” But she is not taken aback by these aspects of violence, as her inner monologue (which is stylistically rendered throughout the novel by italics), notes that “*Paul must have liked it rough*” [*italics original*; AFI, 86]. Interestingly here, the fact that she cannot remember having sex, and that she has clearly been hurt, is not the first issue in her mind: it is that Paul O'Brien must have enjoyed rough sex, and for Emma, this is just something she has to put up with to remain popular and desirable to the gaze of the Other. She has become interpellated by patriarchal ideology, as there is a “shift in the way that power operates: a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze.”<sup>22</sup>

At this stage, she does not feel violated even though she has no memory of what happened, and therefore consent is problematic. The implication is that if he does not get rough sex from her, he will get it from someone else, and then Emma will be less popular. In some ways, despite all the horror of slut-shaming on social media that follows, this insight into her mind is the most poignant; she sees herself as having no agency at all in a sexual situation: her desire is to be desired by others, and whatever it takes to achieve that is exactly what Emma will do. In her case, the “objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime.”<sup>23</sup>

## The abject reflection

It is only when she goes back into school that she realises there is something wrong. Due to the lack of social media contact, she is unaware of what has been happening and of what conversations, images and opinions have been circulating about the party and about her, and, as we are seeing the world

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<sup>21</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Widdows, *Perfect Me*, 186.

<sup>23</sup> Widdows, *Perfect Me*, 186.

through her eyes, as she is a homodiegetic narrator, we so not know either. We see that her seat in class has been taken, emblematic of her gradual displacement as the alpha female of the group. She hears muttering and feels the threat to her sense of self and responds with a repetition of her name four times: "I am Emma O'Donovan" (*AFI*, 77). In the conversation that follows, the reader, like Emma, pieces together the events of the night, how Emma kissed Eli, Maggie's boyfriend: "Kissed? I kissed Eli? Fuuuuuck. 'I didn't . . . I didn't . . . ' (Did I? I can't remember)" (*AFI*, 79). Emma is unsure what she has done that is any different to her normal behaviour, and is quite shocked when another friend, Ali, says dismissively: "Well, maybe, Emma, you could try to be less of a whore. Just a thought" (*AFI*, 79), before going on to explain her disgust at Emma's behaviour:

"Four guys in one night? Do you have any fucking self-respect, Emma?" I just stand there:

I am waiting for someone to defend me. But no one does. They look gleeful, like they have been waiting for this for the last eighteen years and it hasn't come a minute too soon. "Like Paul wasn't enough for you," Ali continues. "You had to ride Sean too, and fucking Dylan Walsh – like, what is wrong with you, Emma? You're sick. You're actually sick" (*AFI*, 80).

All she hears all day are whispers: "Slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore" (*AFI*, 83). People are laughing at her, which is unusual in her life, and her sense of self is collapsing. She runs to the toilet repeating her name in her head: "Emma O'Donovan" (*AFI*, 83), and in terms of the issue of identity and subjectivity, and the uncertainty about her sense of who she is in the two sections of the book is underlined by the repetition of her name 29 times in the book.

She discovers that a Facebook page entitled "Easy Emma" has been set up by the boys who were at the party, and that a large number of pictures have been taken of Emma being raped and assaulted while unconscious or semi-conscious, and these images have been put on the Facebook page, about which she has 630 notifications and 345 likes (*AFI*, 87). The description of her initial interaction with the page is quite harrowing: "I click on the photo. Pale limbs, long hair, head lolling back on to the pillow. The photos start at the head, work down the body, lingering on the naked flesh spread across the rose-covered sheets" (*AFI*, 87-88). The descriptions of her splayed body are graphic, unpleasant, misogynistic and difficult to read, especially as she describes the girl in the images in the third person, and dissociates herself from that objectified, abject image.

One of the translations of the term "Mirror Stage" is as a "[*stade*]" – the inside of a stadium [*stade*],"<sup>24</sup> and this is apt as it expresses the point made by Lacan that our sense of self is always-already predicted by the gaze and desire of others, and is a type of ongoing performance. Here, Emma, who had been quite performative on social media, is now cast in a different role on the social media stage. She is now part of that mediascape which offers a narrative that is imagined, and the split that is central to Lacan's theory, of an observer and an observed reflection. The dialectic of desire that is set up between the two is now played out with Emma seeing, not an Ideal-I, but rather an abject-I in those images and pictures on the Facebook page. It is as if she is both subject and object, but there is no connection between the two – she is in the position of abjection, of "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."<sup>25</sup> Such is her sense of abjection that her very identity enters a process of dehiscence, of gradual splitting, and what Kristeva sees as core to the abject, namely bodily functions such as vomit and faeces, tend to occur in the second section of the book as Emma's body responds violently and viscerally to what has been done to it as she sees these actions and violations on Facebook, as well as the comments about her. For Kristeva:

Abjection – at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion – shares in the same arrangement. The loathing that is implied in it does not take on the aspect of hysteric conversion; the latter is the symptom of an ego that, overtaken by a "bad object," turns away from it, cleanses itself of it, and vomits it.<sup>26</sup>

For Emma, vomiting has become a somatic reaction to her life:

I lie down on the wooden floor, tasting vomit in my breath (*AFI*, 71).

Mam will never speak to me again if I vomit on the kitchen floor in front of Sheila (*AFI*, 75).

... the dress I wore on Saturday night. I take it out. It's destroyed, vomit all over it (*AFI*, 86).

a photo of Sean, his face twisting in a grimace, then another, puke gushing out of his mouth on to my face, and it's in my hair, and they are all laughing (*AFI*, 88).

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<sup>24</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 233.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 45.

I pick up a hairbrush from the vanity table, my eyes watering as I try to wrench out some of the knots (*when was the last time you brushed your hair, Emma?*) and for a second I think I can see chunks of vomit in my hair, that I'm covered in it, *so gross, like, Sean puked all over her, did you see that photo?* I jerk forward, searching. But there's nothing there (AFI, 109).

... until at last my feet touch the round mat at the bottom. It is new. My mother never did get the vomit stains out of the old one (AFI, 109).

I grasp the armrests of the chair, feeling as if I might vomit Scottish shortbread and tea all over Aidan Heffernan's plush carpet (AFI, 134).

The sheer trauma that she now feels has brought about this sense of identificatory dehiscence, as she finds it hard to identify with the images of what she calls "the girl" in the pictures:

*It's not me.*

Dylan on top of that girl (*me, me, that can't be me, that's not me*) his hands over the (*my – no, her*) face, as if to cover her up. She has no face.

She is just a body, a life-size doll to play with.

She is an It. She is a thing. (*me, me, me, me, me*)

*I don't remember. I ...* (AFI, 88).

Instead of being an object of desire, she is now an object of disgust, and this is especially true in the case of Dylan, the character accused earlier by Jamie of rape:

Now Dylan has two thumbs up to the camera. In the next photos his fingers are inside the body, the girl (*me, me, oh God I'm going to be sick*) but she doesn't move. Her head and shoulders have fallen off the edge of the bed. He spreads her legs, gesturing for the camera to come closer, the next few photos of pink flesh, and I think of the hundreds of likes, of all the people who have seen this, who have seen her like this ... (AFI, 88).

... The girl is on the ground in the next photo. She lies there. Another photo.

Dylan is standing above her, his dick in his hand, a thin yellow stream flowing from him on to her head.

Someone has commented under the photo: "Some people deserve to get pissed on." Five people have liked it. Six. No, ten, twelve, fifteen. Twenty. Twenty-five (AFI, 89).

What is especially worrying about these images is that they were not captured by witnesses looking to prove collective guilt in assaulting this comatose and retching young woman; instead, these pictures and captions

were put up by the young men involved themselves: they clearly see nothing wrong in this, and in terms of their own male identities, they are quite happy to be seen in this light by the gaze of the Other in this case a patriarchal other that approves, or at least does not sanction, such misogynistic behaviour. Her sense of subjectivity is clearly split as she objectifies herself, unwilling to identify her own sense of personhood with the abject images on the screen.

Given the connections between urine and abjection in Kristeva's work, the sense that she "deserves" to get pissed on is a further symbolic marker of her abjection, as is the growing number of likes that this image receives. Throughout the second half of the book, the comments and "likes" that these images receive are traumatic for Emma, perhaps even more so than the images themselves, and the fact that this is happening in contemporary, real time is also important, and I would contend, is the main source of her trauma.

Rape is traumatic as is the protracted legal process that is entailed in bringing charges against the four boys, and Emma is also told that the trial itself will be traumatic:

The book they gave me at the Rape Crisis Centre said it could be a "traumatic experience for the victim." What does that even mean? My therapist uses the word "trauma" to explain away everything that is happening to me.

I can't eat. *That's because of the trauma.*

I can't sleep. *That's because of the trauma.*

I can't breathe. *That's because of the trauma* (AFI, 176).

However, the main source of trauma is the social mediascape that does not allow the rape to be in the past, but which continually performs it in the present on social media through images, comments and likes. It is as if there is an ongoing rape of Emma's body, and identity, and her sense of selfhood, which had been so bound up in her body, and in the performativity of her beauty, is now, so every time she looks at social media, all she sees are images of her own rape:

The page has hundreds of likes, and five little stars lined up under the name. "Easy Emma." I'm tagged in all of the photos.

My ribcage feels as if it's caving in to my stomach. Another like, and another, and another appears on one of the photos. 234 likes on just one picture. I've never gotten so many likes before, not even that time I uploaded a photo of myself in my bikini in Côte d'Azur. Maggie had shared it on her page, saying, "Can we all just take a moment to appreciate The Body that is Emma O'Donovan?" Eli had liked that comment. (And I couldn't help wondering what that meant.)

345 likes.

I click on the photo.

Pale limbs, long hair, head lolling back on to the pillow (*AFI*, 87).

The two different images of the body are telling here: in one, Emma is fully in control and is using her body and her beauty as a signifier of her identity – something acknowledged in the quotation by the equation of Emma’s personhood with her body by Maggie. Emma has always used her body as a signifier of her selfhood and worth: “Ciarán looks me up and down. I probably shouldn’t have worn such a low-cut top” (*AFI*, 34); “I smooth down my new dress. It’s black, cut down to the navel, and very, very short” (*AFI*, 42). In her phantasies, she imagines herself in university, “I thought I’d walk across campus in short skirts and bare legs in the summer, pretending that I don’t notice the men staring at me” (*AFI*, 179). Here she is looking to be looked at, looking to be the object of desire, looking to be validated as a person by the gaze of the Other: she is delivering “the female body to the male gaze for delectation.”<sup>27</sup> For Emma to be Emma, she must be seen as beautiful and this sense of being happy with one’s own body is never merely subjective, it is “always conditioned by the attending gaze of the Other.”<sup>28</sup>

Just after she has sex with Paul, he leaves the door open and Laura and her friend and Dylan see her “naked except for my knickers”; she asks him to shut the door and his response is:

“Ah, you’re too hot not to show you off.” He grabs my arm and pulls me up to standing. “Look at her.”

This is the price of my beauty, and I am willing to pay it. I am willing (*AFI*, 68).

The price she pays however, is much higher as her body has moved from being seen as beautiful to being viewed as abject, and the trauma is ever-present and ongoing. Her body has always been on display, through her own agency, and been admired; in the aftermath of the rape by Paul O’Brien, Dylan Walsh, Ethan Fitzpatrick and Sean Casey, and the ensuing proliferation of images on social media, this admiration is suddenly withheld.

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<sup>27</sup> Shuli Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan: Communication and Identification in Psychology and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2018), 130.

## Social media refractions

Emma is unable to disengage from social media even as she continues to be horrified by the images and comments on it. In an example of the Freudian repetition compulsion, she is drawn back to social media to almost wallow in her abjection. Her reasons for this are significant. She tells us that "I promised my parents that I would shut down all my accounts, but I can't. I would be erased. It would be as if I never existed. (Isn't that what I want?)" (*AFI*, 173), so for her, existence, identity, subjectivity are created in the other of social media, and negative responses reliving her trauma and making it ever present are creating a dehiscence, a splitting, in her actual sense of self. Social media has always had a huge influence on her life as we have seen, and even her initial desire for Paul O'Brien is mediated by this factor. Another girl sees her flirting with him, and Emma sees "the jealousy that flashes on her face. I look at Paul again. He looks more handsome somehow, as if their envy is a flattering Instagram filter" (*AFI*, 61). Clearly her attraction is not so much to him as to what he represents: an older man who is much-desired by other girls and who has a girlfriend already. Emma is using him as a way of enhancing her own subjectivity in the gaze of the Other.

After the rape and the "Easy Emma" Facebook page photos, the very strong sense of an undervoiced but prevalent rape culture is clear in the novel, and O'Neill critiques this with great clarity. Rape culture has been defined as "a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women."<sup>29</sup> O'Neill, in her Afterword, makes it clear that this is a central theme of the novel as she says that:

We need to talk about rape. We need to talk about consent. We need to talk about victim-blaming and slut-shaming and the double standards we place upon our young men and women. We need to talk and talk and talk until the Emmas of this world feel supported and understood. Until they feel like they are believed (*AFI*, 199).

The negating and abjection of young women in such a situation, and the default communal identification with the boys is well caught as even Emma's mother says "They're good boys really. This all just got out of hand" (*AFI*, 187).

In terms of negative images created through a reflection back at the self from the Other, the word "rape" appears 51 times; the word "sex" appears 28 times; the word "whore" appears 32 times; the word "skank" appears 22

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<sup>29</sup> Emile Buchwald, et al., *Transforming A Rape Culture* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1995), xi.

times; the word “slut” appears 47 times; and the word “bitch” appears 43 times. The private messages that Emma receives once she has taken a case against her rapists are vile: “*Kill yourself. Run away. Leave here forever. Everybody hates you. Slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore*” (AFI, 173). The trauma, and the repeated exposure to images of that trauma across social media, creates what Caruth calls a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world,”<sup>30</sup> and in the light of Emma’s own sense of selfhood, a breach in her very notions of identity. The fact that in the mediascape in which she exists, the trauma is ongoing and present, as opposed to being a repressed memory of something in the past makes it worse, as does the phalanx of judgement and negative opinions the glare back at her in the mirror of social media, which is where so much of Emma’s sense of selfhood is located.

On social media, she is immediately vilified and is seen as deserving of the treatment she got, as she has been seen to be “asking for it” by her behaviour. This phrase occurs 8 times in the book, in much the same contexts, with people seeing her dress and behaviour as essentially her deserving to be sexually assaulted. So intense is all of this, that at one stage Emma poses the parenthetic question “(Maybe I had been Asking For It?)” (AFI, 186), questioning her own sense of selfhood and agency. The structure of the book is highly significant in that it is a binary where two sections reflect each other; it is the structure is a mirror where two versions of Emma’s subjectivity are reflected in each other. The book is temporally divided into two sections, “Last Year” and “This Year.” Each section has the same chapter titles, also temporally significant: “Thursday”; “Friday”; “Saturday”; “Sunday”; “Monday”; “Tuesday.”

The essential difference in the two years is reflected in the social media interaction and usage; “Last Year,” Emma was active on social media and was in control of the images she posted: she liked who she was in this technological Lacanian mirror; “This year,” all is different as now she is “afraid every time she opens her computer or looks at her phone.” She has promised her parents that she will delete her social media accounts, but she is unable to, as she has spent so long seeking the desire of the other that without it, she fears she would be “erased. It would be as if I never existed” (AFI, 299). Here it is the gaze of the Other that actually validates and verifies the self, even if that gaze is malign and hurtful; this gaze is threatening because it reveals the subject’s dependency on the others who look at it,

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<sup>30</sup> Caruth, *Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 4.



"thereby revealing that the subject is not self-sufficiently the author of its own intentions, modes of being, or forms of enjoyment."<sup>31</sup>

"This Year" she is no longer in control, and the gaze of the Other is now decidedly negative towards her. Such is the structuring power of this gaze that while Emma knows she should not look at the online material, she is unable not to do so; "of course I shouldn't look. I am afraid of looking but I am afraid not to look too" (*AFI*, 173). She has become consumed by social media: "#IBelieveBallinatoonGirl" (*AFI*, 110); she has become part of the process of the "public shaming and policing of women's bodies" known as "slut shaming," which can be found in contemporary social media and popular culture.<sup>32</sup> She sees the photos which have been retweeted again and again; she has become the subject of a national radio debate; some her former friends and acquaintances have posted on social media to show their allegiance to the boys involved:

In each of the photos there are girls, loads of them, each picture with a different group, all of them wearing plain white T-shirts. I know most of them. There's Sarah Swallows and Julie Clancy, surrounded by six or seven other girls from my year. In another there's Susan Twomey, and a few of her friends, and I can barely make out the rest, my eyes blurring. Scrawled on the T-shirts in black marker are the words #TeamPaul, #TeamDylan and #TeamSean, one or two have #TeamFitzy, but not as many. I look at the comments underneath.

Slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore. Slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore. Slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore. Slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore.

Over and over and over.

She was Asking For It.

What did she expect?

I see legs splayed. I see pink flesh, delicate. Bruised. Ripped apart (*AFI*, 173).

The message here is simple: the boys and their female friends are all part of a team – and Emma is not. The clever inclusion of the title and subtitle in this section shows how the phrases have potency. The chain "slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore" is repeated 18 times in the book, demonstrating the pervasiveness of such slut-shaming, which, through the monosyllables and repetition, leaves no room for nuance, or questioning or rebuttal.

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<sup>31</sup> Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 164.

<sup>32</sup> Gemma Commene, *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies: Sex, Performance and Sage Femininity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 30.

The fact that so many of these are girls, former friends or at least acquaintances, shows that the interpellation of women in defence of patriarchal sexual power has not changed: anyone who is not part of the groupthink will be ostracised and deemed more object than subject. Here the conflict and aggressivity of which Lacan speaks in the Mirror Stage becomes overt as in the “spotlight, the subject is flooded with light, is in the overwhelming gaze of the Other”; for the subject in this situation “there is no escape – it becomes a kind of torture.”<sup>33</sup> Here, Emma as a subject becomes a “picture” in the gaze of the Other: “I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture ... I am *photo-graphed*” [*Lacan’s italics*],<sup>34</sup> and as Emma describes graphically, she is now objectified, abject and dehumanised in this searing and all-encompassing gaze of the Other:

“You could be a model. You could be a model. You could be a model.”

I make my mind go blank. I am not that girl any more. I am an It. I am a collection of doll parts, of pink flesh, of legs spread open for all to see (AFI, 121).

“What was that?” my mother asks me, raising her voice to be heard over the whirr of the extractor fan. She heats some oil in a frying pan on the hob and throws in a couple of salmon fillets. The smell is strong. Nauseating. (*Bet it smelled fishy!!!!!!!! one of the comments on Facebook said. I am an It. I am an It. I am an It.* Seventy-six people liked the comment. I made my mother go out the next day and buy vaginal cleanser in the chemist. I used it again and again and again. I wanted to be clean. I wanted to smell of nothing) (AFI, 136-137).

The italicized image of the fish can be read as an analepsis to her mother cooking fish in the morning and to the connections between mother, daughter, female roles and notions of abjection – there are a lot of such polysemic connections to be read in Emma’s internal monologue. As Jade Dillon has noted: “The referral of identity as an *It* distances the notion of self within the protagonist and illustrates her damaged psyche due to the alienation and degradation she has experienced,”<sup>35</sup> and this is exactly what has happened.

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<sup>33</sup> Huguette Glowinski, Zita M. Marks and Sara Murphy, *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms* (London: Free Association, 2001), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Alan Sheridan trans. (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 106.

<sup>35</sup> Jade Dillon, “The Politics of the Female Body in Louise O’Neill’s *Asking For It*,” *Sibéal* 2 (2017): 35.

She has become, in her ablutomanical fixation, the fragmented body that Lacan describes as existing before the Mirror Stage, as the gaze of the Other and the desire of the other are no longer providing her with an identification; in short, they have consumed her identity and she is left as an "it," bereft of approval of "the invisible gaze of the Other to which I unconsciously show myself in order to be acknowledged as worthy of recognition."<sup>36</sup> She has been consumed, like so many other women in contemporary culture, by this neo-liberal cult of shame. By the end of the book, Emma conforms to this new gaze of the Other by telling us that she got dressed, "covering that body up. I stare at my reflection. I look normal. I look like a good girl" (*AFI*, 202). The short sentences and the repetition are almost child-like as she forces herself into a new form of desexualised and a quasi-infantilised ego position. She needs to conform to a hypercritical version of normalcy where women must not be sexually in control, must not voice any opposition to sexual assault, and where "*Boys will be boys will be boys*" (*italics original*; *AFI*, 121), and the "crucial factor in this process is thus the gaze of the Other,"<sup>37</sup> and how its changing demands affect the development of subjectivity. Women are part of the background that allows boys to be boys. As O'Neill put it in a newspaper article five years after the publication of *Asking For It*, "Irish women have a history of being told to stay quiet; we were supposed to be good girls and smile as they cut out our tongues."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reframed: A Guide for the Arts Student* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 73.

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan, Literature, Culture, Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 172.

<sup>38</sup> Louise O'Neill, "When I look at how difficult it is for a rape victim to even get a case at court, I wonder if our legal system is fit for purpose in 2020," *Irish Examiner*, July 4, 2020.