

TV Series Review

Review of *In Treatment* (U.S. Television series). Developed by Rodrigo Garcia. HBO television network, 2008-2010.

Michael McAndrew, M.A. LPCC¹
Colorado Analytic Forum

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously remarked in his Seminar VIII, Transference, that “Love is giving something you do not have to someone who does not want it”. These themes of love, and the frustration of giving something to someone who does not want it, resonate throughout the HBO original series, *In Treatment*, produced and directed by Rodrigo Garcia. *In Treatment* (which ran three seasons from 2008-2010), turns its gaze towards the psychoanalytic practice of psychologist Dr. Paul Weston (Gabriel Byrne). Each episode centres on a particular session of Paul’s many patients over the “week”. The series originally aired as a five night a week series on HBO, Monday through Friday, with a total of 43 episodes in the first season. We see Paul in his sessions with his patients, and then, generally, on Friday’s episode, we see Paul in a kind of supervision, or control analysis, so to speak.

I will not spoil the many twists and turns Paul’s cases take, but will offer an assurance all three seasons are worth watching-whether one is a “green” analyst in formation, or a seasoned practitioner. The first season takes place in Paul’s home/office in Baltimore, Maryland; centred on Paul’s patients played by such critically acclaimed actors and actresses such as Blair Underwood (Alex, a U.S. Navy pilot), and Mia Wasikowska (Sophie, a teenaged gymnast), among others, who all places demands on Paul; demands he vacillates between answering and frustrating. It is this same vacillation, and these same patients, and the tension they cause in both his office and his home that are the pivot point of the first season. It is perhaps one of the most realistic depictions of the analytic setting I’ve ever seen; particularly within the realm of transference. Nowhere is this clearer than Paul’s own work with his former analytic supervisor, Dr. Gina Toll (Dianne West).

Paul comes to “control analysis” to borrow a more Lacanian term, with Gina over his own inability to give his patients what he does not have. Paul could be said to be working from a more intersubjective psychoanalytic lens; Gina even makes a comment early on about Paul’s “New York friends”, referring specifically to the psychoanalytic pioneer Jay Greenberg by name; as well as Paul’s more relational approach to treating his patients. The demand many of Paul’s patient’s place on him for love, particularly Laura (Melissa George), is a demand Paul has a great difficulty in frustrating; hence his return to Gina after not speaking with her for nine years. The source of rancor in Gina and Paul’s relationship lies in that, many years ago, when Paul was still a member of the fictional Baltimore Psychoanalytic Institute, Gina wrote a letter of recommendation, which, while laudatory, expressed her reservations about Paul’s willingness, even eagerness, to answer his patient’s demands for love.

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addresses to Michael McAndrew. Email: mcandrew.mr@gmail.com

Paul left the institute abruptly after this incident, presumably to continue his formation elsewhere and begin his own private practice. Paul and Gina's relationship remains undefined throughout much of the show. Is he seeking a friend? A confidant? A mentor? Or to be in treatment himself? There is transference from Paul to Gina, from the moment he comes to her seeking knowledge he himself does not believe he is in possession of. From a Lacanian reading of *In Treatment*, this supposition of knowledge firmly establishes Paul's transference with Gina. In this way Gina, acting as the semblant of Paul's analyst, frustrates Paul's demands. Many analysts of various schools frustrate this demand (and, we could say all demands are a demand for love) via the practice of abstinence in the psychoanalytic treatment. Ironically, the cases Paul brings to Gina concern abstinence; what he feels are his own mistakes in the treatment, some of which he begins control analysis quite in the dark about-exhibiting the powerful neurotic desire not to know. Gina could be said to represent a more orthodox reading of Freud; and it precisely this reading Freud that Lacan returned to in his seminars, beginning in 1952. Paul is more eclectic, supposedly more contemporary; yet is Gina's more orthodoxly Freudian advice he seeks in order to resolve his own issues, and those of his cases. In this way, we can view their dialogue as one that continues today, in our own psychoanalytic institutes, forums, and societies. Therein lies one of the great questions facing psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapies today: can you, should you, answer the patient's demand for love, for relation, for meaning? For Lacanian psychoanalysts, the answer is no. For many others schools of Freudian thought, it remains an open question. While no mention is made of Lacan, or his school of thought throughout the series (perhaps unsurprising given his *nom de rien* in the larger United States), the questions he posed about love and transference loom large in Paul and Gina's dialogue.

In Seminar XI, the Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Lacan delivered to us that "to love is, essentially, to wish to be loved". Paul, through his "control analysis" with Gina, is able to realize that in the demands of his patients, and his difficulty in not acceding to this demand, lies a kernel of his own unanalyzed symptom, and that, to act on this demand with any of his patient's would not be about their own treatment, but would be about his own wishes and fantasies. This speaks powerfully to the need for analysts, of any orientation, to continue to supervise and control cases with another analyst-not only throughout their own formation, but even after their own self authorization as a psychoanalyst. Throughout Season 1; some of Paul's cases are handled well; and some poorly. Without spoilers, Paul chooses to answer some demands, and frustrate others-this inconsistency proves to be costly, for both Paul and his patients. Despite personal and clinical setbacks, Paul continues his control analysis with Gina throughout the second season, in order to deal with the events that continue to plague him. Freud called psychoanalysis an impossible profession, and there are many who would reach the same conclusion about this impossibility in viewing Paul's struggles throughout the first two seasons of *In Treatment*. In the third season (which, while continuing in the nightly format, switches to four "sessions" a week), Paul returns to his own treatment, in earnest, with a younger therapist, Adele, (Amy Ryan). Paul continues to work through his own symptoms, but, most importantly, he begins to put into question everything he is doing, or has done as a therapist. I believe this is truly the effect of psychoanalysis; when the patient begins to put identifications into question; and perhaps, finally, shyly, to listen to their desire, as Paul does.

In Treatment offers both psychoanalysts and the lay viewer a superbly acted series of clinical vignettes that should resonate with anyone who has ever felt the stirrings of love. Lacan, in his Seminar XX, Encore, posited that “the only thing we do in analytic discourse is speak about love”. Indeed, Paul, his patients, and Gina-all are concerned precisely with the idea of love, and the beautiful misunderstandings that result therein. There is both happiness and unhappiness, laughter and sorrow in *In Treatment*, as well as everything in between that can occur in the treatment, and outside of it. *In Treatment* is not so much a show about therapy, but about love; that which is spoken and misspoken, heard fondly and painfully, time and again.