

Thesis of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Reclaiming the Self: An Intersectional Analysis of
Post-Sexual Abuse Narratives in Anglophone
Television Series**

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1. The antecedents and objectives of the doctoral dissertation

The starting point of this dissertation lies in the transformation of filmic representation of sexual abuse after Harvey Weinstein's public trial in 2017, and the global spread of the #MeToo movement as a result. These events disrupted the silence surrounding sexual violence, exposed the complicity of institutions that had long shielded perpetrators, and demanded a new way of thinking about gendered power and trauma. They also changed how sexual violence was represented in media, particularly on television, where survivor-centered narratives gained unprecedented visibility.

Before this moment, rape narratives in popular culture often reinforced harmful stereotypes. Television and cinema repeatedly depicted sexual assault as a device for plot sensationalism, focusing on the crime, the perpetrator, or the investigation rather than the survivor's lived experience. The female body was aestheticized as a site of violence, while survivors' voices were sidelined and doubted. Such portrayals normalized disbelief,

perpetuated rape myths, and trivialized the psychological and social realities of trauma. Hence, television not only reflected but also normalized and sustained a culture of silence.

The Weinstein scandal, followed by the outpouring of testimonies through #MeToo, made it impossible to ignore the systemic nature of sexual violence, and highlighted how traditional media had failed to create ethical, empowering spaces for testimony. Post-2017, creators began experimenting with new forms of storytelling that foregrounded survivor perspectives, shifting attention from the female body as spectacle to recovery, from institutions to individuals, and from silence to empowerment. This transformation represents one of the most important antecedents of this dissertation.

Feminist media scholarship has long critiqued the objectification of women's suffering and the persistence of patriarchal myths in screen culture (Roxane Gay, Sarah Projansky, Linda Alcoff, and Laura Gray). Trauma studies emphasize the difficulty of representing experiences that resist narrative closure, while ethical

theories of care and witnessing stress the responsibility of both creators and audiences when engaging with stories of violence. These traditions converge in the post-Weinstein era, where television functions as a site for survivor-centered narratives that are both ethically attentive and culturally impactful.

Serial storytelling can mirror the fragmented, recursive nature of trauma, thereby aligning form with content, cultivating empathy in the viewer, and sustaining reflection of the issues portrayed, enabling a deeper engagement with characters and their long-term recovery processes. For these reasons, television has become an especially powerful space for cultural debates on consent, shame, credibility, and justice.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this dissertation emerge directly from these antecedents. The first objective is to examine how post-Weinstein television reconfigures representations of rape by centering the survivor's subjectivity. Instead of reducing survivors to victims or narrative catalysts, these series grant them agency, voice, and complexity.

A second objective is to analyze how survivor-centered narratives reshape the ethics of spectatorship. By employing techniques such as subjective lighting, close-ups, and fragmented temporality, these screen texts invite audiences to become co-witnesses rather than distant consumers. They demand recognition and empathy, transforming viewing into an ethical act of responsiveness.

A third objective is to analyze the methodological innovations within such narratives, particularly in the context of autoethnographic storytelling. Predominantly, Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* demonstrates how creators can integrate personal experience with cultural critique, collapsing the divide between author and subject, and creating a gray area between fiction and reality. This positions survivor testimony as a form of resistance.

Post-Weinstein storytelling does not simply reflect social change; it contributes to it by reshaping public discourse around trauma, justice, and recovery. The overarching objective is to evaluate television's potential as a transformative medium. Through seriality,

accessibility, and survivor-centered ethics, television has intervened in the cultural politics of sexual violence in ways that demand scholarly attention.

The Delimitation of the Dissertation Topic

The delimitation of this research responds both to the scope of the research questions and to the cultural moment within which the inquiry is situated. The dissertation investigates the representation of sexual violence in Anglophone television following the Weinstein revelations and the emergence of the #MeToo movement in 2017. By narrowing its focus to this specific temporal, cultural, and media context, the study ensures both depth of analysis and clarity of argument.

The temporal delimitation is particularly significant. The year 2017 represents a cultural rupture in the global conversation about sexual violence, power, and gendered injustice. While rape narratives have long been a feature of both cinema and television, it was only after the Weinstein case and the mass mobilization of survivors through #MeToo that a widespread reevaluation of such narratives occurred. By focusing on the period from 2017 to the present, the dissertation

situates itself within a transformative moment in media history, when creators, audiences, and critics alike began to demand more ethical, survivor-centered storytelling.

A second delimitation concerns the medium of study. The dissertation focuses exclusively on television rather than cinema or other forms of media. This decision derives from both practical and theoretical considerations. Practically, the proliferation of streaming platforms such as Netflix and HBO has elevated television to a central cultural form, capable of reaching vast and diverse audiences. Theoretically, television offers unique narrative affordances that distinguish it from film. Its episodic structure, extended character arcs, and capacity for serial storytelling allow for a deeper and more sustained exploration of trauma and recovery. Unlike cinema, which often shortens narratives into a two-hour format, television can engage viewers across weeks or months, fostering what may be described as long-term empathy.

A third delimitation lies in the cultural and linguistic scope of the study. The dissertation focuses on Anglophone television series, specifically those

produced in the United Kingdom and the United States. This choice is guided by the recognition that these contexts played a particularly central role in the Weinstein revelations and the subsequent development of the #MeToo movement. Moreover, the Anglophone media industry has historically set the terms for global cultural debates, shaping how narratives of gendered violence circulate across borders. While non-Anglophone contexts undoubtedly offer rich sites for analysis, their exclusion in this dissertation allows for a focused examination of the cultural industries most directly implicated in the Weinstein scandal.

The dissertation also delimits its object of study to three case studies: *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2017), *Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019), and *I May Destroy You* (HBO, 2020). These series were selected for their explicit engagement with sexual violence, their critical acclaim, and their cultural impact. *Broadchurch* represents an early instance of post-Weinstein storytelling, foregrounding the theme of shame in the aftermath of rape. *Unbelievable* dramatizes the systemic disbelief that survivors encounter, revealing the

institutional failures that compound trauma. *I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel, exemplifies the innovative use of autoethnography, exploring consent, memory, and healing through a deeply personal yet culturally resonant narrative. By focusing on these three series, the dissertation can engage in close textual analysis while situating each work within broader cultural and theoretical debates. Other series that may also address sexual violence are excluded, not because they lack relevance but because the selected case studies provide sufficient scope for the dissertation's research questions.

Equally important is the exclusion of certain types of narratives. Male-centered rape stories, for instance, are present but are not part of the dissertation's focus. While such narratives exist and are worthy of scholarly attention, the emphasis here is on female survivors and the reconfiguration of female subjectivity in post-Weinstein television. While cinematic depictions of rape, including those produced before 2017, are referenced in the theoretical framework, they are not the central object of analysis. Such films provide valuable

conceptual background; however, the core focus of this research remains on post-2017 Anglophone television.

In summary, the dissertation is delimited by its temporal scope (post-2017), its medium (television), its cultural focus (Anglophone contexts), its case studies (*Broadchurch*, *Unbelievable*, and *I May Destroy You*), and its thematic emphasis on female survivor narratives. By establishing these boundaries, the dissertation situates itself within a specific cultural and academic terrain, one that is both historically significant and theoretically rich.

2. An Overview of the Methods Used

The methodological framework of this dissertation is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach that brings together feminist media studies, trauma theory, ethics of care, and close textual analysis.

Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies provide the primary critical framework for this dissertation. The representation of sexual violence is inextricably tied to questions of gender, power, and agency, and feminist theory offers the tools to interrogate these dynamics. This approach

examines how survivors are positioned within televisual narratives, whether their voices are marginalized or amplified, and how cultural myths about rape are challenged or reinforced. Feminist media criticism foregrounds the importance of subjectivity and agency, highlighting how post-Weinstein television disrupts traditional portrayals by placing survivors at the center of their own stories. It also draws attention to the politics of production, authorship, and reception.

Trauma Studies

The second methodological pillar of this dissertation is trauma studies. Trauma, by definition, resists conventional forms of representation, as it disrupts memory, language, and narrative coherence. Theories of trauma developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman emphasize the difficulty of testifying to experiences that exceed symbolic articulation. In the context of television, these challenges manifest in aesthetic and narrative strategies that attempt to represent the unrepresentable. Trauma studies thus provide the conceptual vocabulary to analyze how shame, memory, and silence function in

survivor narratives. They also foreground the importance of listening to testimony with trust, acknowledging the fragmented and contested nature of memory while affirming the survivor's voice.

Ethics of Care and Witnessing

A third methodological dimension derives from the ethics of care and witnessing. Post-Weinstein television places ethical demands not only on creators but also on audiences. The act of viewing is reconceptualized as a form of witnessing that carries moral obligations. The ethics of care, as theorized by scholars such as Lizzie Ward, Fiona Robinson, and Sarah Clark Miller, further stress the importance of empathy, solidarity, and relational responsibility. Together, these frameworks allow for an analysis of how television cultivates ethical spectatorship. Survivor-centered narratives compel viewers to acknowledge trauma in ways that resist voyeurism and foster radical empathy.

Close Textual and Aesthetic Analysis

Finally, the dissertation employs close textual analysis to examine the aesthetic strategies through which survivor-centered narratives are constructed. This

method involves detailed attention to mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, dialogue, and narrative structure. Close analysis also illustrates how aesthetic choices align with ethical commitments: camera work that privileges the survivor's perspective resists objectification, while narrative pacing that dwells on aftermath rather than spectacle shifts focus from the act of violence to the process of recovery. This methodological focus highlights the importance of form in shaping meaning, and reinforces the dissertation's argument that representation is never politically neutral.

The integration of these methods ensures a multidimensional approach. Feminist media studies provide the political lens, trauma theory supplies the psychological and narrative framework, ethics of care highlights the moral stakes, and close textual analysis grounds the study in concrete aesthetic practices. By combining these methods, the dissertation avoids reductionism and acknowledges the layered complexity of representing sexual violence.

3. The Academic Results of the Dissertation

The dissertation demonstrates that post-Weinstein television represents a break from earlier traditions of portraying sexual violence primarily as spectacle. Historically, rape scenes were often shown explicitly, with the camera lingering on the act itself rather than its aftermath. In contrast, survivor-centered narratives reorient the gaze away from violence and toward the subjective experiences of survivors. This shift privileges interiority, aftermath, and recovery over sensationalism. By repositioning the survivor as the interpretive center, such narratives resist objectification and constitute a new cultural model of representation, one that prioritizes subjectivity, selfhood, and ethical responsibility.

The analysis highlights that shame (*Broadchurch*), distrust (*Unbelievable*), and consent (*I May Destroy You*) emerge as the three central categories shaping survivor narratives in the post-Weinstein era. These categories are not only narrative devices but also reflections of wider cultural debates. Shame illuminates the internalized stigmatization that silences survivors, while distrust exposes the institutional mechanisms of

justice and care that delegitimize their testimonies. Consent, as redefined in *I May Destroy You*, underscores the importance of memory and ambiguity surrounding sexual violence. Together, these categories chart a cultural shift from simplistic portrayals of rape toward nuanced explorations of survivor selfhood.

A significant finding of the dissertation is the role of autoethnography in survivor-centered storytelling, which positions survivor testimony as a mode of resistance that defies the silencing mechanisms of oppression. This methodological innovation also redefines the relationship between creator and audience, as viewers are invited into an intimate dialogue with the survivor's lived reality. Thus, autoethnographic storytelling becomes both an artistic strategy and a political intervention, reshaping the epistemological terrain of trauma representation.

The dissertation identifies radical empathy as a defining aesthetic of post-Weinstein television. Unlike voyeuristic portrayals that distance viewers from survivors, radical empathy seeks to create somatic bonds between audience and character. These aesthetic

strategies demand patience and attentiveness from viewers, cultivating empathy that is active and repositions spectators as co-witnesses, responsible for acknowledging survivors' truths and reflecting on the broader cultural implications of sexual violence.

The dissertation argues that survivor-centered television fundamentally redefines the ethics of witnessing. Traditional spectatorship often allowed audiences to consume sexual violence narratives with detachment or even fascination. Post-Weinstein series disrupt this dynamic by compelling audiences to recognize their role in sustaining or dismantling rape culture. This ethical repositioning suggests that viewing is never a neutral act: it carries moral obligations to respond, believe, and act in solidarity.

Another key result is the recognition that survivor-centered narratives resist defining survivors solely in terms of victimhood. Instead, they foreground processes of agency, resilience, and recovery. By emphasizing survivor selfhood beyond trauma, these narratives refuse reductionist portrayals that define women only by their suffering. They assert that while

sexual violence is devastating, it does not erase survivor agency.

The dissertation finds that post-Weinstein television serves as a critical lens on institutional failures, particularly the systemic disbelief of survivors. This institutional critique extends beyond the justice system, implicating communities, workplaces, and media industries that perpetuate cultures of silence. Additionally, the research underscores that survivor-centered storytelling cannot be understood apart from intersectionality. Post-Weinstein television demonstrates that intersectional storytelling not only reflects diverse survivor experiences but also challenges hegemonic narratives that universalize trauma. This result highlights the need for more inclusive and nuanced representations that honor the plurality of survivor realities.

Finally, the episodic format sustains viewers' attention across time, reinforcing empathy and solidarity. Seriality thus emerges as more than a formal feature; it is a cultural strategy that deepens the ethical and emotional impact of survivor narratives.

Publications

1. Filaj, Anxhela. “Liberating the Oppressed Body in Roxane Gay's *Hunger*.” *Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of the Self*, edited by Péter Gaál-Szabó, Szilárd Kmeczkó, Andrea Csillag, and Ottilia Veres, Partium Kiadó, 2021, pp. 51–60. *Cultures, Contexts, Identities*, no. 3, ISSN 2631-1674.
2. Filaj, Anxhela. “The Balkans’ Turn to Confess in *Anatema* and *The Wounds*.” *Europe and European Cinema at Times of Change = Változó Európa, változó európai filmkultúra*, edited by György Kalmár and Zsolt Győri, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2021, pp. 183–198. *ZOOM: A kortárs filmtudomány kulcskérdései*, no. 7, ISSN 2063-8450.
3. Filaj, Anxhela. Translated by Horváth, Hanga. “A kiszolgáltatottságban élők és a kortárs rendezői film: Representations of Social Inequality in 21st Century Global Art Cinema [Társadalmi egyenlőtlenségek ábrázolása a globális művészfilmben].” *Debreceni Szemle*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2022, pp. 352–357. ISSN 1218-022X.
4. Filaj, Anxhela. “‘Nobody Can Be Vulgar All Alone’: The Power of Shame.” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2023, pp. 207–224. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30608/hjeas/2023/29/1/11>.

5. Filaj, Anxhela. "Sexual Violence Tells Stories." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2021, pp. 203–206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/1/18>.

Conference Paper and Workshops

Filaj, Anxhela. "Breaking Boundaries: Visual Media's Role in Ending the Marginalization of Sexually Abused Women." *1st International Conference on Visual Culture: Periphery and Interdisciplinarity in Visual Studies*, 23–25 Oct. 2023, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos & Universidad Complutense, Madrid. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. "On the Verge of Disruption: The Interplay Between Social Media and the Self." *1st Eurasian Forum on Youth Dialogues on Preventing Youth Depression*, 26 Feb. 2023. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. "Constructing or (De)Constructing Female Empowerment? The Case of Mulan." *International Conference on Film Studies: (De)constructing Cinematic Identities*, 6-7 Feb. 2021. London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. "Investigating Sexual Assault on Screen: A Netflix Case." *Postgraduate Symposium in English*

and American Studies, 31 Jan. 2020, University of Debrecen, Hungary. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. “When a Rape Case Gets Derailed: Depicting Flawed Investigation in *Unbelievable*.” 8-11 March. 2020, *WomenBeing Conference*, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. “*The Female Gaze in Cinema*.” *Gender Research Workshop*, 24 Oct. 2020, London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, London, UK. Workshop.

Filaj, Anxhela. “Constructing Collective Memory about Female on Male Rape in *Queen of Hearts*.” *Visuality, Representation, and Mediality in Contemporary Screen Studies Conference*, Dec. 2020, University of Debrecen, Hungary, Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. “The Intersectionality of Gender with Religion in *Unorthodox*.” *International Conference on Gender Studies: Mapping Gender*, 5-6 Dec. 2020, London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. “Trauma and Memory in *Hunger*.” *Networks Conference*, Dec. 4, 2020, Oradea, Romania. Conference presentation.

Filaj, Anxhela. “*The Creation of the Albanian-American Identity: The Adopted Norms and Stereotypes*.” *Young Researchers of IEAS Workshop*, 7 Feb. 2019, Institute of

English and American Studies, University of Debrecen,
Hungary. Conference presentation.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (2)

- Filaj, A.:** Liberating the Oppressed Body in Roxane Gay's Hunger.
In: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of the Self. Ed.: by Péter Gaál-Szabó, Szilárd Kmeckzó, Andrea Csillag, and Otília Veres, Debrecen Reformed Theological University : Partium Kiadó, Debrecen ; Nagyvárád, 51-60, 2021, (Cultures, Contexts, Identities, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 3.) ISBN: 9786155853456
- Filaj, A.:** The Balkan's Turn to Confess in Anatema and The Wounds.
In: Europe and European Cinema at Times of Change = Változó Európa, változó európai filmkultúra. Szerk.: Kalmár György; Győri Zsolt, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 183-198, 2021, (ZOOM : A kortárs filmtudomány kulcskérdései, ISSN 2063-8450 ; 7) ISBN: 9789633189146

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

- Filaj, A.,** ford. Horváth, H.: A kiszolgáltatottságban élők és a kortárs rendezői film: Representations of Social Inequality in 21st Century Global Art Cinema [Társadalmi egyenlenségek ábrázolása a globális művészfilmben.] szerk. Kalmár György.
Debr. szle. 30 (3), 352-357, 2022. ISSN: 1218-022X.

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

- Filaj, A.:** "Nobody Can Be Vulgar All Alone": The Power of Shame in.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 29 (1), 207-224, 2023. ISSN: 1218-7364.
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- Filaj, A.:** Sexual Violence Tells Stories.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 27 (1), 203-206, 2021. ISSN: 1218-7364.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/1/18>





List of other publications

Other journal articles (1)

6. **Filaj, A.**, ford. Horváth, H.: A kiszolgáltatottság képei: Representations of Social Inequality in 21st Global Art Cinema [Társadalmi egyenlőtlenségek ábrázolása a globális művészfilmben.], szerk. Kalmár György. Utánközlés másodközlés, *Alföld*. 73 (5), [1-6], 2022. ISSN: 0401-3174.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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