

Telling the Untellable: Trauma and Sexuality in *Big Little Lies*

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ABSTRACT

The problem of sexual violence, including rape, domestic assault, sexual harassment, and molestation has recently become a topical issue both in public discourse and popular culture. The unspoken individual traumas have found their way to the world of TV series, such as HBO's mini-series *Big Little Lies*. The essay explores the unique ways in which the television series treats sexuality and personal traumas. It argues that while by no means can it be regarded as a soap opera, *Big Little Lies* occasionally uses and rewrites the genre-specific codes of this traditionally low-prestige television genre intended for women to alter the representation of individual traumas in popular culture. The use of flashbacks and involuntary repetition as narrative elements along with the retrospective framework of a criminal investigation make the serial form much suited to examine individual traumas. The television series attempts the almost impossible: to speak of the trauma's unspeakability, and simultaneously it seeks to maintain its high viewership. (ZsOR)

KEYWORDS: television series, trauma, soap opera, rape, #MeToo

In the past few years the problem of sexual violence, including rape, domestic assault, sexual harassment, and molestation, has become a central topic of both public discourse and popular culture. The tipping point was, of course, the Weinstein scandal and the following #MeToo movement (and most recently, Michael Jackson's fall after the debut of *Leaving Neverland* [2019]). While more than seventy women pressed charges of sexual harassment and assault against film mogul Harvey Weinstein, which resulted in more and more women, often after decades of silence, telling their story to the public around the world, yet another change has occurred. The unspoken individual traumas have found their way to the medium of television and to the world of TV series, which is also underlined by the 2018 Golden Globe awards, where most of the film and television nominees wore black to protest the proliferation of sexual harassment in the film industry. Although there is no causal relationship between the #MeToo movement and the representations of sexual violence on TV, it may be presupposed that there is still a correlation between them and that they share a common ground. Netflix's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015), Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) and HBO's two

mini-series *Big Little Lies* (2017-19) and *Patrick Melrose* (2018) all prove that the rules of public discourse have been visibly transformed recently. Furthermore, it appears that the still unspoken topics are now paired with innovative—or at least in the mainstream rarely represented—techniques of narration.

In the following, I will map out these creative techniques in the first season of *Big Little Lies*.¹ The novelty of this mini-series lies in its treatment of sexuality and personal traumas: while by no means can it be regarded as a soap opera, it occasionally uses and rewrites the genre-specific codes of this traditionally low-prestige television genre intended for women to alter the representation of individual traumas in popular culture.

Based on Liane Moriarty's novel, *Big Little Lies* tells the story of five Monterey women: Madeline, who remarried after her divorce with two children; the rich and envied Celeste, who lives in a passionate but abusive relationship with her husband, Perry, and has two twin boys; Jane, significantly younger than both, who raises her son as a single mother; Renata, the successful CEO and mother of a young girl, and Bonnie, the second wife of Madeline's ex-husband, Nathan, with one child. The television series revolves around a criminal investigation following Perry's death and uses the witnesses' testimonies to reconstruct the series of events that led to his fall.

In a similar fashion to many contemporary TV series, the intro is a rhythmic montage composed to a roughly 1.5-minute long soundtrack (Michael Kiwanuka's *Cold Little Heart*). In the first thirty seconds, viewers are shown a fleeting landscape, horizontally shifting in the eyes of passengers in cars driving along a picturesque, ocean coastline. We see women behind the wheels, with their faces mostly hidden, only ears and the edges of jaws visible—the way children would see their moms from the back seat. The intro shows the five main protagonists and their children: Madeline (Reese Witherspoon), Celeste (Nicole Kidman), Jane (Shailene Woodley), Bonnie (Zoe Kravitz), and Renata (Laura Dern). Though in a distanced and moderate fashion, the appearance of the lead actors in the intro is more typical of daytime "telenovels" than of high-prestige prime-time TV series of post-millennial broadcasting.

The remaining one minute of the intro continues to shape viewers' anticipation of watching a soap opera. After the fashion-show like parade featuring the five women and their children, the intro moves on to a montage that seems extraordinarily precise because of the seemingly conventional, kitschy images it uses. The entire visual arsenal of soap opera intros appears here: passionate embraces fading into the waves of a tempestuous ocean,

sunsets, beautiful bodies pressed against each other, unidentifiable and decontextualized lovers, and a hand holding a gun against a neutral background. Contrary to the expectations encouraged by the intro, the mini-series uses strict, well-composed structures instead of never-ending storylines and an infinite number of episodes and reframes the soap opera clichés of love-passion-intrigue to reflect on the public presence of sexual violence and, in general, of non-consensual touching, which is the basis of #MeToo movement.

The plot starts with the children in focus: on the first day of pre-school, someone choked Amabella, Renata's daughter, and the girl claims that it was Ziggy, Jane's son. The war of mothers that begins after this sad affair is but a pretext to expose the secrets of the protagonists: Madeline tries to cope with the fact that her ex-husband remarried and that he and his new wife, Bonnie, live nearby as a perfect family; by mid-season we also learn that Jane had been raped and became pregnant; and Celeste, although she and her husband look like a dream couple, lives in an abusive relationship.

In a similar fashion to soap operas targeting housewives, *Big Little Lies* primarily focuses on the family and the private sphere. Yet, whereas soaps display a fundamentally paternalistic world for the (mostly female) viewers, with the men working and the women evidently staying at home, the HBO-series transforms the conventional universe of soap operas into an explicit problem, as foreshadowed in the intro, with the female protagonists driving their huge SUVs in a classic masculine power position (even though taking the kids to school is usually the mother's responsibility). All the mothers in *Big Little Lies* work: Renata is the CEO of a tech company, Jane needs her accountant job to make a living, Madeline has a part-time job at the local theatre, Bonnie is a yoga instructor, and Celeste wants to return to her profession as a lawyer, which she had given up for her family. Renata already mentioned in the first episode that "I'm not liked. It's one thing to be demonized for having the temerity of a career. But look at this. Look at our life. What kind of person chooses to work? Certainly not a mother, by any acceptable standards."

The mother in women's television in general and in soap operas in particular is not only a central character, but also appears as an implicit viewer. Tímea Antalóczy suggests that the soap opera seems to be the only visual art form that activates the motherly gaze—inasmuch as it makes us worry about others ("A szappanoperák"). If it is indeed the case, then it might be claimed that Madeline's character is a mise-en-abyme of this motherly gaze: (at least initially and superficially) she is the one whose family life is happy and

functional, and looking after Jane and Celeste, as an almost comical counterpart of the fellow-mothers' stories, she replicates the perspective of the viewer mother. Ed, Madeline's husband, also reflects on this in the first episode while talking about Jane: "You're drawn to damaged people. Even Celeste." It is also a telling narrative solution that in the first part of the series all of Madeline's problems originate from the fact that she feels her status as a mother to be threatened. Her older daughter, Abigail, would like to move in with her father and his new wife, and the younger one starts school, hence Madeline feels that she is less needed as a mother. She explains to Abigail:

What people don't tell you is that you lose your children. As beautiful and wonderful as who you are now, this little girl whose curly hair I used to detangle and had bad dreams and used to crawl into my bed? She's gone. I guess that's what I'm feeling a little bit. Compounded a little bit by the fact your sister's going into the first grade. I'm losing my babies. Which has been clinically compared to a massive period, I think.

Although the series touches upon how each man experiences his role as a father (such as Nathan, who wants to do better in his second marriage, or Perry, whom Celeste does not want to leave because *otherwise* he is a fantastic father), the emphasis is still on the mothers, and, in a broader context, on the solidarity between women. Moriarty's novel ends with almost all the main characters being present when the manslaughter occurs, while the series concludes with the presence of the five women only, hence the consensual silence underlines female comradeship. These very same women in the last scene of the last episode, along with their kids, laugh and have fun by the sea, this most feminine symbol, in an idyllic scene exempt from men.²

In *Big Little Lies*, the narratives of the five women result in five interweaving yet separate plotlines—a frequent narrative solution of soap operas. However, the abrupt jumps between plotlines, which involve full thematic shifts and result in mostly random sequences of scenes in soap operas, often appear well-composed and meaningful in the HBO mini-series. The most prominent example is the parallel organization of parallel fates, that of Jane and Celeste, both suffering from the traumas of sexual violence, both by the very same man. A montage sequence in the fifth episode draws attention to the similarities in the two storylines: Celeste's therapy and Jane's trip to visit Ziggy's alleged father are juxtaposed in a series of quick cuts—two very similar journeys of self-reflection and self-healing. The cuts become

faster and faster, yet the climatic encounter, that is, whether Jane shoots Saxon Baker and if Celeste leaves Perry, is not shown on screen.

Sexuality as a central theme of the mini-series also appears in a very different fashion from melodramatic conventions. While soaps mostly revolve around love and sexuality, the actual deed—partly because of the daytime broadcast time—is never shown on screen, and it is always pictured as an inevitable symbol of mutual love and never as a problem or difficulty. In *Big Little Lies*, while much of the physical action appears on screen, such scenes have a complicated relationship with love and intimacy. Sexuality, however, has a central role in the portrayal of the main characters. The depiction of Celeste, for instance, is first and foremost highly sexualized (in contrast to her general clothing style) as most of her fights with Perry end in sex, and, what is more, these instances are presented as highly aestheticized scenes evoking the traditional forms of on-screen erotica. Celeste herself confesses to Madeline: “More often than not we end up having sex. . . . Yes. It starts with anger, and it’s complicated. Sometimes I think he likes to fight because it leads to sex.” Jane’s sexuality is also a focal point of her character’s depiction, but functioning as a stigma as her consensual one night stand turns into a nightmarish rape scene and her consequent pregnancy with Ziggy. Jane reflects on this very issue in reaction to Madeline’s refusal to discuss matters of sexuality: “Why don’t you mean to talk about sex? Cause I was raped?”

In Madeline’s marriage, sexuality or even passion is clearly missing and only appears in an extramarital liaison. Ed, Madeline’s husband is almost envious when he is talking about Perry, who, according to the official version broke his urethra during sex (in truth, it was during a fight). In constructing Madeline as an asexual mother figure, the kitchen counter scene of the fifth episode becomes symbolic. At the beginning of the episode, the viewer witnesses Celeste and Perry making love on the kitchen counter. The kitchen itself would fit into any interior design magazine, and the scene features all the topical clichés of erotic literature meant for women: a husband arriving home unexpectedly, clothes torn apart, bodies bending, pressing against each other. As an ironic addition to the sequence, it is occasionally intercut with the testimony of one of the neighbors interrogated after the murder: “People out there who say they have a satisfying sex life . . . give me a break.” The next scene shows Madeline and Ed’s kitchen, where the kitchen island in the middle of the room, as a par excellence symbol of motherly duties, is fully covered with various packs of foods, as if there was no place for passion in Madeline’s life. When Madeline gets to know how her friend uses the kitchen counter with her husband, she, on the one hand, seriously doubts it, and on

the other hand attempts something similar with Ed, which turns out to be a comical and awkward counterpart of Celeste and Perry's passionate love scene. Instead of torn textiles, their pants are ungracefully down, instead of arching backs, Madeline needs to free some space for her elbows between two packs of waffles, and instead of satisfaction they are interrupted by the arrival of Chloe, their daughter. After the failed lovemaking, one of the witnesses also remarks how asexual Madeline and Ed look together, explaining that each time she encounters a new couple, she tries to imagine them in an intimate situation: "With Madeline and Ed, I just couldn't imagine that."

Besides sexuality, the other unaddressed issue in the world of soap operas is individual trauma.³ Although it might occur thematically,⁴ trauma does not dominate the narrative in soap operas since they are based on the primacy and integrity of the family (even though this family is permanently on the edge of chaos) (Antalóczy). Presenting sexual violence as a traumatic event would dismantle the family structure and hence question the foundation of the depicted world. As typical of all individual traumas: they are traumatic precisely because they remain outside all interpretative frameworks. As Anne Rutherford contends, "the survivor has knowledge of something that nobody should know—a knowledge that potentially tears at the social fabric and ruptures the fundamental existential ground of existence in one's own body" (81). That is why Szabolcs Virágh claims that the distinctive feature of a traumatic event is its extraordinariness (166). While soap operas elegantly maneuver around such events, this extraordinariness of trauma is of crucial importance in *Big Little Lies*, especially in the narrative of Jane. Her trauma is so intense that it eventually tears apart the Otter Bay idyll as mirrored by the series' motto: "Perfect life, perfect lie."

The series depicts Jane as someone who demonstrates all the symptoms of a person suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder: repression that is realized as amnesia (she does not remember the face of Ziggy's father until she sees him again), hallucinations, nightmares, and uncontrollable memory fragments as the unspeakable traumatic event resurfaces from her unconscious. Of the nightmares/hallucinations that appear on screen, the end of the third episode is especially symbolic. Jane dreams that a faceless male figure attempts to get into her house: first he bangs on the door, then he breaks the glass and climbs through the window while Jane tries to unlock the drawer in which she keeps her revolver. It is fairly easy to decipher that the burglary as an intrusion into the safe space of the home is analogous to the violent penetration into the female body.

Miklós Takács argues that individual traumas are traumatic precisely because the person suffering from them is unable to relocate them from the medium of the body, so they remain senseless and unintelligible (“A kulturális trauma elmélete” 44). In Jane’s case this is most apparent in dreams and daytime hallucinations about running on the ocean shore. In her flashbacks she is moving along the shore in a blue cocktail dress barefoot, following the footprints of an evaporating, vague male figure, and in the present she regularly goes jogging as a means of keeping her body in shape, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of Madeline and Celeste. Her nightmares always end with her jumping/falling into an abyss, being unable to stop—just as a traumatized person is unable to break away from the vicious circle that involuntarily repeats the story that she is trying to get rid of. This “bodily” nature of trauma is also reflected in Ziggy’s sleepwalking, with Jane terrified each and every time she finds him standing at her bed in the dark room in the middle of the night. This, on the one hand, may signal the secondary traumatic stress of the next generation, while, on the other hand, it is also an excellent symbol of how the event (and its physical consequences) has failed to integrate into the individual’s self-narration, since sleepwalking is a telling example of the body breaking free from the control of the mind. Therefore, individual trauma by definition remains in the medium of the body, and its sufferer is unable to integrate it into her narrative identity. As Rutherford observes, “the impact of major trauma is in the Humpty Dumpty-like inability to put the pieces back together” (82). In the case of Jane, the trauma representation is optimistically progressive, parallel to the healing of a traumatized person. The first three episodes of the series merely use the recurring, fragmented, montage-like flashbacks to inform the viewer about Jane’s past in the images of her running on the shore in a torn cocktail dress, a popping champagne bottle, Jane’s face in a bathroom mirror, images of lovemaking, the machine sound of the electric shades moving upwards, and finally Jane naked in the sea. This is in line with what E. Ann Kaplan identifies as the basic characteristic feature of trauma films: repeated sets of images which remain without a clear beginning or an end and, what is more, without proper meaning (204). It is only in the third episode that a well-rounded narrative is presented, when Jane tells her story for the first time to Madeline. In the four episodes to follow, the similarly unintelligible, obsessively repeated, decontextualized images are almost entirely gone, only those scenes remain that exhibit Jane’s frustration in running, but even that gets more and more positive (containing more and more successful revenge/self-defense), as if the process of restoring integrity of the self

gradually overwrote the memories of the traumatic night. In the closing montage of the fourth episode, Jane is shown running and during her shooting practice; that is, doing sports that help her regain control over her body. Throughout the montage, in accord with the background music (Martha Wainwright's *Bloody Mother Fucking Asshole* (2005) containing angry lyrics with a female vocal), Jane appears as a strong woman who is able to decide her own fate and who, in her fantasies, shoots thrice at the faceless man who raped her. It seems as if the very act of telling the untellable has stopped the involuntary repetitions and set right the time out of joint. Jane herself reflects on it in the fourth episode:

Ever since I told you about Ziggy's dad . . . there's this thing happening to my body. Like it's wanting to wake up. I always knew that my reactions to that night have been too big. Pretended it meant nothing, of course, it meant everything, but it's like I had to say the stupid words he said to me out loud to you for them to lose their power. Keeping them a secret helped them retain their power.

Therefore, sharing the burden in this case offers the possibility of healing, also emphasized by the scene in the fifth episode where Jane, at first, runs alone on the shore, then she is joined by Celeste and later Madeline, and, this time, she is stopped from falling down from the cliff by an (actually existing) balustrade. The closure of this healing process is offered by the very last scene of episode seven, where the footprints that Jane so often sees in her nightmares are now replaced by Ziggy, and the originally frustrating memory is overwritten by the very positive, almost idyllic happy end,⁵ where the women protagonists and their children have a picnic by the ocean.

As *Big Little Lies* appeals to a very broad audience, the TV series first and foremost belongs to the realm of popular culture.⁶ This manifests itself in the closed (or, what is more, closable) narrative and the resolvable traumatic event.⁷ Kaplan interprets it as a characteristic feature of the trauma representation that is mostly found in melodrama, another genre intended for women. She argues that trauma in the mainstream is well localizable, healable, and, along with all this, appears as a past event, which can be represented unproblematically (204), whereas the main difficulty (and artistic potential) of trauma lies in the fact that it is unresolvable and untellable.

In terms of temporality, there is a very visible connection between processing a traumatic event and investigating a crime. As Tamás Bényei contends, "the plot of a detective story is fundamentally and obviously

repetitive. The plot repeats the crime, or, more precisely, the plot that is started by the crime, only exists in comparison to it, approaching it, gaining its endpoint and truth value (meaning, legitimation) as a retelling and interpretation of the original sequence of events” (63). Had not *Big Little Lies* announced the death of an unnamed character in the first episode (a blurred view of sirens wailing, a montage of scared people at a ball) and included eyewitness testimonies, the *genre* of the series would have been altogether different. Making retrospection a significant narrative motif made *Big Little Lies* leave the conventions of soap opera and melodrama and move towards crime/drama genres: without the temporal disruptions the series would be exclusively about the domestic issues of white, upper-middle-class women.

The way flashbacks model the obsessive repetition of the traumatic event is similar to how the investigation is rooted in the figure of retelling; that is, the plot duplicates the crime and the series of events that had led to it. Bényei also draws attention to the link between the two temporalities when he argues that the usual linear logic of the world’s temporality is suspended until the circumstances of the past event are revealed (63). As we get to know more and more about Jane’s traumatic experience, more and more information is presented about the homicide as well. The two sequences of events are also paralleled by the fact that the finale uses one single scene to give a face to both mysteries as the viewer discovers who raped Jane and who the perpetrator and the victim of the manslaughter were. Due to the nature of filmic narration the retrospectively evoked antecedents of the crime are positioned as present, and the same applies to the involuntary flashbacks that Jane experiences and which are basic features of trauma’s temporality. The “other present, which is supposed to be past” (Takács, “Narrativitás”) is created by the suspension of the difference between internal time and chronological time because of a traumatic event (Elseasser 197).

In the age of media convergence, the new generation of television series is frequently binge-watched, hence much of the systemic redundancy is rendered unnecessary (Gollowitzer). In contrast, Robert C. Allen argues that soap opera is redundant at an artistic level, where the multiple diegetic retelling is a structural necessity, because the viewer needs to see how each character reacts to a given piece of information; that is, the pleasure of watching soap operas lies not in the continuous forward movement of the plot but in the waves each event casts in the lives of the protagonists (155). It may be argued that in *Big Little Lies* repetition substitutes for redundancy and generates new layers of meanings, and both the post-traumatic urge to

repeat the traumatic event and the investigation as a means of retelling the plot supports this claim.

Itay Harlap compares an Israeli feature film and a TV series, both of which deal with the trauma of the 1982 Lebanon War. He argues that the serial format allows for a more complex representation of the same traumatic event. His claim is based on the observation that while a feature film unavoidably gravitates towards an ending, the serial structure enables more continuity and cyclicity and in this sense the resolution is always postponed (179). The case of *Big Little Lies* as a mini-series with only seven episodes is still different from the three-season *Parashat Ha-Shavu'a* [Weekly Torah Portion]. In addition, *Big Little Lies* also differs from more traditional television series in that the seven episodes together form a coherent narrative, the episodes do not end with cliffhangers, which are used to maintain viewer interest and to urge viewers to watch the next episode, but have well-composed, also musically supported, clear closures. Therefore, the viewer is not looking forward to the next episode because she is worried about her favorite characters but because the closing scenes are almost invariably ambivalent—for example, Ziggy's *Papa Was a Rolling Stone* performance at the end of the sixth episode (as he does not know who his father was, the lyrics are especially spot-on), or the very last scene of episode 5, where Celeste, in spite of the continuing abuses, drives her sons to meet their father at the airport, and they cry together with Perry, united in guilt, shame, and forgiveness.

The structure of the third episode, in which Jane finally tells her story to Madeline, also supports this claim. In the opening scene of the episode, the curtain rolls up—literally and symbolically (this is a recurring element; the first episode ends with the shades going down, then they move up at the beginning of the second episode, but only in the third episode is the context revealed), and a naked woman is shown with her back to the camera, walking into the ocean. The quick to-and-fro cuts identify this woman as Jane, who now watches Ziggy playing on the beach. Although all plotlines progress in the episode, it is still dominated by Jane's narrative, which is also emphasized by the closure, where the opening scene is repeated, but this time, aware of the back story, it also evokes associations of purification. Therefore, although the mini-series as a narrative form does not enable the continuous postponing of the post-traumatic resolution, the protracted storytelling, organized into episodic circles, or more precisely, spirals, still models the temporality of trauma.

The missing closure appears in the form of the spectacular allegory in the series, ignoring the Chekhovian gun-principle, and doing so in relation to a gun, which appears in all the episodes on multiple occasions. Jane sleeps with a gun, regularly imagines how she would shoot her attacker, and she meets Nathan, Madeline's ex-husband, at the shooting range, and in addition, when Madeline asks her about it, she explicitly connects the post-traumatic healing process with the gun as an object: "They say just holding one in your hand has psychological benefits for emotional trauma . . . Yeah, because it inhibits mentalization so it helps you block yourself off from emotions." What is more, when she goes to see Saxon Baker, her friends worry that she might shoot him on sight. In the last episode, however, it turns out that Perry was not killed by a gunshot, but by a fall that fractured his skull. This lack of firing the gun may allude to the impossibility of resolving the trauma, despite the fact that the season has a happy ending.

Up to this point, the topic of *collective* trauma in *Big Little Lies* has been addressed. The lesson of the #MeToo campaign, however, in terms of the media representation of sexual violence is that although it always happens to the body, it is never a private but a public affair, since it raises questions about the community's self-understanding. This claim is also underlined by the fact that the entire series' logic is based on mirror structures, reflecting on the questions of sexuality and non-consensual touching of the initial conflict, namely, that someone had choked Amabella, and, what is more, the consensuality of touching is explicitly problematized in the world of children. The case of Harry the Hippo can be understood as a *mise-en-abyme* here. When the teacher introduces the stuffed animal to the class, she also announces it will be taken care of by one of the children at weekends, but everyone is free to hug him. Amabella raises the crucial question: "Does Harry want to be hugged?"

The mirror as a physical object, a focal element in the visual solutions of the mini-series, also helps to establish the link between the individual and collective levels of traumatization. Mirrors are most prominent in the depiction of Celeste: her figure is portrayed in many scenes being multiplied in mirrors, mirroring surfaces, or screens. In film studies, the mirror is traditionally the site of the individual's self-reflection, while it also enacts medium-awareness, especially when it appears as a secondary frame within the film frame.⁸ Interestingly, in Celeste's case this is different—such double frames are more characteristic of Madeline's depiction, who has a scene in almost every episode where she is talking to her family from next to her dressing table, through two mirrors that partly mirror each other. With

Madeline as both the comical counterpart to Jane's and Celeste's drama and the *mise-en-abyme* of the female viewer's (motherly) gaze, such self-reflection seems very telling.

The use of such framed mirrors also appears in the case of Celeste, such as the last but one scene of the second episode, when Celeste, getting ready for bed, places her phone against her dressing mirror, Skypeing with Perry. In this example there is a threefold frame, where Perry's and Celeste's own narcissistic gazes coincide, creating Celeste's body as an object of desire. The same logic peaks in the closing scene of the episode, when Celeste and Perry make love through the laptop screen, in a multiply metonymical situation, again in a threefold frame: the laptop screen with Perry in it appears as a secondary frame, and Celeste's image in the top right corner can be understood as a mirror within a frame within a frame. The very last frame of the episode is a reverse shot in a symmetrical frame: Celeste kneeling on the bed, looking at the threefold mirror, creating her own body through others' gaze and hence gaining pleasure.

Most often, though, Celeste's face is mirrored in glass surfaces, which do not form secondary frames because their borders are beyond those of the film frame and are both transparent and reflecting at the same time: typically window glass panels, through which the camera constructs the gaze of both Celeste looking out *and* an external voyeur looking in. From this aspect Celeste's very first scene in the show is crucial: she takes pictures of her twins with her phone, and a few shots later, in a scene starting with a shot where Celeste is mirrored in the window (and the computer screen functions as both a source of light illuminating Celeste's face and a second mirror), she checks which picture she could post on Facebook, to which Perry remarks that "others will like it too" (meaning the photo). The mirror structures also reflect on how Celeste's self-esteem is created in other people's eyes, depending on others' opinions—which is similar to how she derives sexual pleasure by seeing herself in the mirror. Therefore it may be claimed that in the universe of *Big Little Lies*, violence against women is far beyond being an issue to be handled as a private problem, which is apparent in the narrative, the use of symbols and in the visual solutions. Sexual violence is a problem of each and every member of a community as anyone anytime can get into a similar situation.

The opportunity for identification is explicitly thematized by the way the show treats music and lyrics. In popular music, "I" and "you" are constructed as empty deixes, situational personal pronouns into which—and this is key to their popularity—anyone can fit, overtaking the role of the

singing *I*, addressing it to any *you* he or she wishes. *Big Little Lies* regularly uses music as a means of creating new layers of meaning. The tune that is played during Celeste's first appearance, for instance, is Charles Bradley's "Victim of Love," which, since by that point the viewer already knows that someone died, may be regarded as an excessive decision of the implied author. Ziggy's "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" performance and Marta Wainwright's song that Jane listens to have already been mentioned. The series, however, is special because the plot's focal "Elvis and Audrey" charity ball (where taking up someone else's identity is not an exception, but a requirement) elevates the free substitution of empty deixes to a thematic level. Its comic potential is exploited when Ed waits for Madeline at home, dressed as Elvis, singing "One Night With You," and it is also telling that Nathan is planning to sing "Looking for Trouble" after their careful mutual avoidance is turning into explicit hostility with Ed.

The overt thematization of easy identification does not only reflect the pleasure of traditional "women's film genres" (Kuhn), but it can also highlight the problem that individual trauma weakens in the act of community retelling but may also lose its peculiarity when revealed as such. As Harlap puts it, "not only is it difficult to speak the trauma (because it is an event exceeding the limits of understanding) but it is also impossible authentically to describe a personal trauma, for it always gets 'soiled' by other trauma representations; thus personal memory commingles with the other's memory, and the personal commingles with the collective" (175). This claim is also supported by the fact that non-traumatic flashbacks (such as the beginning of the fourth episode, when Madeline evokes how Abigail moved to her father's) use the very same visual language as Jane's traumatic memories: the uniqueness of trauma is dissolved into thin air.

By using karaoke and music in general to problematize identification—that is, establishing a haste link between the individual and the collective levels of speakability—*Big Little Lies* obviously exceeds the private universe that is presented in soap operas and traditional "women's television," just as the stake of the #MeToo movement is that what was once hidden as a secret, a stigma, should find its way into the public discourse and be transformed into the shared problem of the entire community.⁹ *Big Little Lies* therefore problematizes the genre-specific features of soap operas to create a unique, innovative narrative technique. This is what Jason Mittell calls "spectacular storytelling," or, with a compelling metaphor, "narrative special effects" (36). He argues that we not only watch the television series offered in the post-2000s era of complex TV to let ourselves become immersed in

the realistic narrative world, but a great deal of the joy comes from the “narrative fireworks,” also enabled by bingeing (34). Besides the prolonged narration of the mini-series, the already discussed montage-like, non-linear temporality, the complex symbolism, and the reflecting narrative levels all point towards that direction. Although the trauma representation of the show is far from being flawless (as representability is already questioned in relation to trauma, let alone complete healing), it certainly raises the question: what do unspeakable experiences have to do with popular culture and television as a medium? According to *Big Little Lies*, quite a lot.

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Notes

¹ While Season 2 of *Big Little Lies* is just as complex in the representation of trauma and sexuality, this paper focuses on the first season as a solid, closed narrative unit.

² The five actresses appeared together in the Golden Globe Awards ceremony, holding hands, naturally wearing black, thereby strengthening the connection between their public personae and the characters they play. Similar messages are by no means rare in the television series of the last few years—indicative examples include *Orphan Black*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in a twisted way *Sharp Objects*.

³ This is true despite the fact that, for instance, Susannah Radstone claims that trauma has a special place in popular culture; moreover, she also contends that trauma is a “popular culture script”; that is, it motivates pop culture and has its own fixed narrative conventions within it (189).

⁴ What is more, E. Ann Kaplan argues that melodrama, as the film equivalent of the soap opera as a television genre, is based on the portrayal of a traumatized (female) subject (202).

⁵ The perfect happy ending is only disrupted by the very last frame: we see the idyllic picnic from a long shot, through binoculars, and the unmissable click of the Zippo lighter gives a hint about the identity of the voyeur—this single detail made it possible for the creators to come up with yet another season.

⁶ According to *TV Series Finale*, an average of 1.17 million viewers watched the episode on premier nights.

⁷ Season 2 nuances this claim by re-opening the wounds that everyone thought were long healed.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the topic, see Julian Hanich's work.

⁹ Even the concept of the hashtag itself is founded on the universal “I,” which enables identification.

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