

## Flashing Pain

### Cinematic Articulation and Compassionate Gaze

This paper examines the cinematic articulation, more specifically the editing style of the miniseries *Big Little Lies* (2017, HBO) and *Sharp Objects* (2018, HBO) both directed by Jean-Marc Vallée.

The cinematic articulation of both series is defined by the fragmented and associative way in which trauma reveals itself through memories for the female lead characters. In both cases, the narrative plot is mainly driven by these pieces of memories, focusing on the emotional and cognitive work of processing trauma. The series utilize a special form of flashback cuts, scattered and inserted in the narrative flow of the audiovisual texture without necessarily distinguishing between different time layers and spaces. On the one hand, these violent cuts rip the continuity of the plot apart; on the other, they create complex audiovisual metaphors by connecting shots based on visual and aural cues instead of spatiotemporal causality.

The paper is based on the close reading of formal-aesthetic characteristic of the flashback scenes. I argue that this specific editing style triggers a complex embodied, affective, and cognitive reaction in the viewer and helps develop a so called “compassionate gaze” (Jane Stadler).

In the analysis of the series, I am following a synthesis of phenomenological and cognitive approaches inspired by the work of Tarja Laine, Kathrin Fahlenbrach and Jane Stadler. Tarja Laine argues in her book *Feeling cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film* that film creates an embodied experience that engages the spectator in a complex sensuous and cognitive relationship. Laine’s attempt is to approach cinematic emotions as unified states or processes that involve both affective appraisals and cognitive evaluations, affect being an implicit quality of the stream of emotion. (Laine 2015, 2) Furthermore, she argues for an active understanding of emotions in film, so that they are neither regarded in their representational nor their significative function, rather as matters of agential practices, actions, and intensities. (Laine 2013, 4). Kathrin Fahlenbrach’s work on audiovisual metaphors follows the theory of cognitive metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson) and argues that audiovisual codes rely on the physical and affective experience of the viewer so that audiovisual metaphors activate meaning connecting the film’s aesthetic system with bodily experiences and their energy, affect, rhythm and valence. Finally, what Jane Stadler describes as “compassionate gaze” functions as an aesthetic mode to “to bridge the distance between self and other, establishing a foundation for ethical understanding,” in other words to create a state which allows for the ambiguity of experiencing aversion of the negative emotions and compassion at the same time. (Stadler 2012, 20)

#### References:

- Fahlenbrach, K. 2008. “Emotions in Sound: Audiovisual Metaphors in the Sound Design of Narrative Films.” *Projections*, 2, 85-103.
- Laine, T. 2013. *Feeling cinema: Emotional dynamics in film studies*. New York: Continuum.
- Stadler, Jane. 2012. *Cinema's compassionate gaze: empathy, affect, and aesthetics in "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly"*. *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*. edited by Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey. New York, NY, USA: Routledge. 27-42.

**Short Bio:**

Szilvia Ruszev is a film editor, media artist and scholar working across different media formats. Her broader research interest focuses on sensuous knowledge, montage theories and politics of post cinema. Her own artistic work relates to very personal moments, certain states of emotional solitude in relation to the Other, both in its particular and abstract notion. As editor, she collaborated with internationally acclaimed directors such as Peter Greenaway, Anders Østergaard, and János Szász. Her award-winning work has been part of numerous international film festivals and exhibitions such as Karlovy Vary IFF, TIFF Toronto, Berlin IFF, Siggraph and Codame. Between 2010-2016, she was a faculty member of the Editing Department at the Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf. Currently, she is an Annenberg Fellow, pursuing a Ph. D. degree in Media Arts + Practice in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California.