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'Don't Tell Mama': Empathic Unsettlement and the Body as Living Archive in *Sharp Objects*

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This article considers the mini-series *Sharp Objects* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2018) through Dominick LaCapra's (2001) notion of 'empathic unsettlement'. This concept defines an empathic experience in which the imaginatively affective responsiveness to another's suffering leaves one displaced and troubled. Such an unsettlement results from a representation that maintains the other's pain as irreducible and unassimilable. This fine balancing between responsiveness to and recognition of the absolute alterity of the other's suffering can be cinematically evoked via a challenging relationship between narrative, image track, and soundtrack. The disturbing emotional alignment with the series' female characters – at once traumatised survivors and cruel perpetrators – appeals to the spectator's ethical imagination to navigate such troublesome screen world, which is further upset by recurrent sounds ominously haunting the images: the distressing squealing of the pigs at the family slaughterhouse, the younger sister's iteration of 'Don't tell mama', the fan blades slicing the air, symbolic reminders of the sharper objects inhabiting this world. Sounds are matched by equally disquieting images, such as the protagonist's scarred body, which invites us to literally read her pain, turning her into something reminiscent of a 'living archive' (LaCapra 2001, p. 92). *Sharp Objects* thus cultivates empathic unsettlement in spectators through the tension between a familiarly structured narrative that draws viewers in and a disruptive aesthetic that preserves the experience of others' suffering as incomplete, fragmented, and irretrievable.

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> '[T]raumatic experiences do leave traces, whether on a large scale (on our histories and cultures) or close to home, on our families, with dark secrets being imperceptibly passed down through generations.' (Bessel van der Kolk – *The Body Keeps the Score*)

Introduction

This article focuses on Dominick LaCapra's notion of 'empathic unsettlement' through the HBO mini-series *Sharp Objects* (2018). Adapted from Gillian Flynn's novel and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, the series has attracted significant critical and scholarly attention for its exploration of trauma, memory, and female violence (Cutchin 2021; Gardner and Miller 2024; Harper 2020; May 2024). However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the spectatorial dynamics through which traumatic experience is mediated and encountered. Drawing on LaCapra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement', this article moves beyond trauma as represented content to the formal and affective strategies through which the series positions its viewers in relation to suffering.

Female violence (against and by women) and trauma lie at the core of *Sharp Objects*. The series follows journalist Camille Preaker (Amy Adams) as she returns to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri, to cover the murders of three young girls. As Camille delves deeper into the mystery, she also navigates the complicated dynamics of her estranged relationship with her mother, Adora (Patricia Clarkson), and her half-sister, Amma (Eliza Scanlen). As the series progresses, it becomes apparent that much of Camille's suffering is rooted in the death of her younger sister Marian (Lulu Wilson), who passed away as a result of an unnamed illness when they were children, as well as in the treatment she has received at the hands of her mother, which ranges from complete disinterest to icy contempt. From the very first episode, we are made aware of Camille's lingering trauma, as she often turns to alcohol to self-medicate and engages in self-mutilation by carving words onto her body as a way to externalise her emotional distress. Eventually, it becomes clear that Adora exhibits symptoms consistent with Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a mental health condition in which a caregiver, typically a parent or guardian, exaggerates, fabricates, or induces illness or injury in a person under their care, often a child. The investigation ultimately reveals that Adora has killed Marian, attempted to kill Camille, and is slowly poisoning Amma. Amma, however, is not only a victim but also a perpetrator, as we find out in the last episode that she has killed the two girls in Wind Gap. In light of this revelation, Amma's iteration of 'Don't tell mama', which recurs in every episode, beginning as a sisterly joke, here

loses any playful nuance to become emblematic of the brokenness of this matriarchal family as well as an ominous reminder of the consequences of trauma.

This plot summary evidences *Sharp Objects'* layered exploration of gendered, intergenerational trauma, which calls attention to both the representation of traumatised individuals and the possible spectatorial engagement with this suffering. As such, methodologically, the article combines close textual analysis with trauma theory, paying particular attention to audiovisual form. Alongside narrative developments, we closely examine the opening credits sequence, with specific attention to the relationship between sound and image, and the inscription of trauma on the body. Rather than treating trauma solely as a thematic concern, our analysis explores how *Sharp Objects* formally structures the viewer's encounter with traumatic experience. Through these strategies, we argue that the series invites viewers into a complex encounter with suffering while simultaneously resisting complete identification with it.

The discussion unfolds in three stages. First, we outline LaCapra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement' and explore how the series balances engagement and disruption to elicit a spectatorial response caught between affective resonance and reflective distance. We then turn our attention to the aesthetics of the opening credits, considering in particular the soundtrack and how certain stylistic techniques introduce viewers to a disturbed and disturbing screen world. We conclude by focusing on the physical marks of trauma that the series' protagonist exhibits by means of the idea of the body as 'living archive' (LaCapra 2001, p. 92) and how intergenerational trauma tragically binds the women in her family. It is precisely this tension between proximity and distance that the following discussion explores through LaCapra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement'.

Feeling in the Gaps: 'Empathic Unsettlement'

There is a growing body of scholarship on empathy and cinema, which focuses on the spectator's imaginative sharing of a character's emotional or mental state (among others, Sinnerbrink 2016; Smith 2017; Stadler 2017). Such an imaginary positioning of the viewer in a character's shoes is carried out via stylistic devices and narrative cues that encourage us to feel *with* a character. Often, a poetic yet tenuous link is established between empathy and morality, as if the former could unproblematically and somewhat automatically lead to the latter. That is, as if my sharing of a fictional character's suffering may lead to my behaving morally (or more morally) towards the suffering other in the everyday. A possible risk with this optimistic view of empathy in cinema is its potential immoral consequences via the appropriation of someone else's emotional or mental experience. Thus, instead of increasing our ethical capacity, empathy can

even undermine it. In this regard, Malcolm Turvey stresses that 'empathic experiences occasioned by fictions might impede rather than enhance morality by giving rise to "empathy-avoidance," "burnout," and "self-licensing" behavior' (2023, p. 93).

Rather than rejecting empathy or positing a direct link between empathy and morality, we take LaCapra's notion of 'empathic unsettlement' as a starting point for exploring how audiovisual narratives can elicit a feeling for another's traumatic experience without reducing it to identification with that trauma. We understand empathy as the ability to imaginatively resonate with someone else's pain without necessarily feeling (or having felt) that same pain or trauma. More specifically, as Terry Eagleton argues in discussing sympathy and empathy, 'there is a difference between feeling *for* and feeling. I do not have to feel your pain, in the sense of mimetically recreating it within myself, to feel for you. There is a difference between feeling sorry for you and feeling your sorrow' (2003, p. 156). Thus, I may feel someone's sorrow without necessarily feeling sorry for them. Accordingly, empathy could be defined, in Emy Koopman's words, as that which 'allows us to [...] feel with, the other whom we do not know, may not understand, or even like' (2010, p. 243) – something that will become particularly relevant for discussing the empathy that spectators may feel for the female characters in *Sharp Objects*.

At the centre of the series, in fact, are somewhat unlikeable female characters who resist straightforward emotional alignment. Even before the revelation of Adora's and Amma's murderous acts, the women of *Sharp Objects* embody forms of subjectivity that are too troubling, contradictory, and at times violent to sustain uncomplicated empathy. Amma is perhaps the most striking example, embodying a form of femininity that eludes stable categorisation. Simultaneously manipulative and vulnerable, cruel and affectionate, sexually assertive and childlike, she brings together a number of qualities that are conventionally coded as undesirable in women. In doing so, she participates in the recent proliferation of female antiheroes in cinema and television (see Bogutskaya 2023; Gardner and Miller 2024). To use Anna Bogutskaya's categorisation in *Unlikeable Female Characters* (2023), Amma is 'the bitch', 'the trainwreck', 'the psycho' who brutally murders three girls. Yet, she is also the child who plays with the (monstrous) dollhouse and who surrenders to her mother's harmful acts of care. A similar complexity also characterises the series' other female protagonists: Adora is at once a grieving mother, the monstrous mother, and a woman whose behaviour is entangled with mental illness; Camille is a textbook survivor of child abuse (see Herman 2015, chapter 5), struggling with an adult life for which she lacks basic coping mechanisms and structures. How, then, are spectators to respond to these characters?

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra develops the notion of 'empathic unsettlement' within his work on historical trauma and in relation to how traumatic

experiences are embodied and retained within individuals. By 'empathic unsettlement', LaCapra refers to an imaginatively affective responsiveness to the other's suffering which leaves one displaced and disturbed because of the impossibility to reduce someone else's pain to sameness. That is to say, 'empathic unsettlement' consists in feeling with the other without over-identification with the other and their pain or trauma. According to LaCapra, 'empathic unsettlement' entails 'being responsive to the traumatic experience of others' (2001, p. 41), while insisting that an empathy that 'resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other would depend both on one's own potential for traumatization … and on one's recognition that another's loss is not identical to one's own loss' (2001, p. 79). In this way, 'empathic unsettlement' marks the limits of our knowledge of others by positing an unbridgeable gap between one person's suffering and another's capacity to resonate with it. There is no knowledge of the other person that could ever be comprehensive; thus, empathy involves an imaginative sharing of someone else's world (of pain) which can never be assimilated to my own and which I can never fully grasp – and it is precisely in this knowledge-gap that 'empathic unsettlement' can emerge.[1]

This tension between responsiveness to and recognition of the absolute alterity of the other's suffering can be evoked audiovisually via a challenging relationship between narrative, image track, and soundtrack. More specifically, 'empathic unsettlement' in film can be solicited through a compresence of a story that engages the spectator and subtly disruptive techniques apt to prevent an over-identification with the suffering other. Discussing 'empathic unsettlement' in literary criticism, Koopman stresses the significance of 'a balance between disruption and engagement' (2010, p. 240). In fact, an utterly disruptive work would alienate spectators, preventing empathy ('If we cannot relate to the characters at all, how are we supposed to (critically) engage with their suffering, or their cruelty?' [Koopman 2010, pp. 240-241]). Similarly, if we are too immersed in the narrative and over-identify with the suffering character, we abolish the distance necessary for feeling-with while maintaining the other's pain as absolutely different.

'Empathic unsettlement', thus, emerges as a productive framework through which to probe the relationship between spectators and suffering others on screen, preserving the irreducible alterity of the other. Spectators are invited to inhabit the screen world

[1] The notion of 'empathic unsettlement' recalls Emmanuel Levinas's work on the face-to-face encounter and the irreducible infinity of the other (1969). Within Levinas's philosophy, such an encounter is an ethical interpellation (the face of the other embodies the commandment 'you shall not commit murder' [Levinas 1969, p. 199]) and, accordingly, it has been used as a framework to investigate ethics in cinema (see, for instance, Cooper 2007; Grønstad 2016; Lamberti 2020; Saxton 2010). Levinas elaborates on the encounter between the self and the other in terms of a fundamental yet irreducible relationship, which is based on the essential 'otherness' of the other person; that is, the other person is never fully knowable, they can never be reduced to an image or a thought (hence, the epiphany of the face to face).

and engage with its characters and their experiences; yet, they never fully identify with them or their pain. It is specifically this oscillation between engagement and disruption that gives rise to 'empathic unsettlement'. For example, we do not need to identify with *Sharp Objects*' protagonist Camille – a journalist struggling with alcoholism and self-harm – to be affected by her experience. By immersing us in her fractured world, the series creates the conditions for an encounter with traumatic subjectivity without demanding direct identification. This dynamic is established from the first episode, when adolescent Camille (Sophia Lillis) introduces us to her adult self by piercing her hand with a paper clip. In this screen world, the past physically impinges upon the present. Through a sophisticated editing style that collapses the boundaries between present experience, memory, and hallucination, the series repeatedly links Camille's younger and older selves, formally reproducing the broken temporality of untreated trauma.

Yet the same formal strategies that foster emotional engagement also complicate it. By revealing the origins of Camille's suffering, the series encourages understanding and affective proximity. At the same time, her acts of self-harm and scarred body might provoke discomfort, unease, or even disgust. As we discuss later in the article, Camille's body bears the physical traces of trauma, materialising the ways in which traumatic experience is stored in the body and continues to shape the present (see, for example, Baum 2013; Herman 2015; Van der Kolk 2015). The series, therefore, neither invites complete identification nor maintains emotional detachment. Instead, it positions spectators in the unstable space between proximity and distance that LaCapra describes as 'empathic unsettlement'.

This dynamic is relevant to *Sharp Objects* as a whole. The series cultivates 'empathic unsettlement' in spectators through the tension between a recognisable narrative structure that draws viewers into its world and audiovisual aesthetics that repeatedly disrupts such immersion, preserving the experience of the suffering other as incomplete, fragmented, and ultimately irretrievable. What *Sharp Objects* encourages, then, is a 'feeling in, instead of filling in, the gaps' (Koopman 2010, p. 247) by means of a style which at once exposes and withdraws. The series' opening credits sequence is representative of this broader dynamic and, in its deceptive simplicity, it reveals the repetitive cycle of trauma and the raw violence visibly hidden in the corners of the perfect family.

Images Otherwise: Sound and Meaning in *Sharp Objects*' Opening Credits

The opening credits offer an initial opportunity to explore the tension between engagement and disruption and how it contributes to fostering 'empathic unsettlement' in the viewer. In fact, with each episode, the opening credits uncover an increasingly

violent, disturbed, and disturbing screen world. The same set of images are accompanied by a different version of the same song in every episode, stressing the unstable nature of a seemingly fixed reality (the past, trauma). The shots comprising the opening credits dissolve or superimpose onto one another, thereby eerily linking apparently disparate images which are often out of focus, blurred, or traversed by lens flare. A subtle violence oozes from the sequence, spanning from the fan blades slashing the air to the close-up of blood slowly dripping (we can almost taste the blood's stickiness). This same image track is accompanied each time by a different soundtrack which elicits a different mood, thus opening up a screen world that progressively becomes more menacing and disturbing.

Structurally, the opening credits revolve around repetition and variation as expressive of trauma – first and foremost, that of the protagonist, but also that of the other female characters, particularly the victim-perpetrators Amma and Adora. *Sharp Objects* opens on trauma and violence, returns to it throughout the series, and concludes with it, tracing a cyclical pattern of violence that binds the women of this family. Narratively, violence by women against women is transmitted across generations in ever-changing forms: from Adora's mother's violence towards Adora, to Adora's violence towards her daughters Marian, Amma, and Camille, to Amma's violence against the three young girls, and finally to Camille's violence against herself. Stylistically, the series plays with variations and repetitions to aesthetically resonate with the narrative, starting from the opening credits: the same image track repeats itself; the soundtrack changes and yet also plays, in its turn, on variations on the same theme.

The structuring theme for the opening credits is 'Dance and Angela' by Franz Waxman, originally composed for *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951). In the original film, the music is used during a joyous moment in which the protagonist, George (Montgomery Clift), dances and falls in love with Angela (Elizabeth Taylor). *A Place in the Sun* belongs to the Golden Age of classical Hollywood, something evident also in Waxman's score. Thus, the use of this musical theme for the opening credits imbues the world of *Sharp Objects* with a sense of nostalgia, further stressing the relevance of a past that refuses to withdraw from the present. Each episode's soundtrack is a variation on Waxman's theme, from the electronic version (episode two) to the piano and voice solos (episodes three and five, respectively). Thus, the sonic variations of Waxman's love theme rhyme with the narrative variations of maternal and filial love themes in *Sharp Objects*.

While the first and the last episodes both return to Waxman's original version, reinforcing the series' cyclical structure, the middle episodes instead present slight variations on the same foundational theme, with one apparent exception. Episode four, titled 'Ripe', opens with the song 'Cupcake Kitty Curls' written ad hoc by Mark

Batson. The lyrics make explicit references to Camille's scars and include words such as 'cupcake', 'kitty', 'punish', 'wicked', and 'lipstick', which are indeed carved on the protagonist's skin. In an interview, the show's music supervisor Susan Jacobs explains how, despite appearances, the song playing is very much still the same, it is simply 'a different interpretation' (quoted in Miller 2018). This pattern of repetition is both connected to the multifaceted nature of truth, which *Sharp Objects* slowly and engagingly reveals to the viewer, and indicative of the central theme of trauma. Elsewhere in the series, repetitions occur, each time acquiring a slightly different meaning – for instance, we hear Amma issuing the warning 'Don't tell mama!' in every single episode, which starts as a sisterly joke and culminates in a chilling refrain by the finale.

The editing of the opening credits, like the editing of the episodes as a whole, mirrors the highly elliptical content, allowing for an in-betweenness, the co-existence of past and present; or rather, it allows for the lingering presence of the past into the present, which is yet another way to perceive and conceptualise trauma. In 'Transgenerational trauma and repetition in the body' (2013), Rob Baum attends to the ways in which trauma is corporeally stored and re-lived in a sort of 'dead present or a non-present' (p. 39). She observes that, in some traumatised individuals, there is 'a temporal splitting between present and past, in which (without appropriate treatment) the trauma event continues to replay in an interminable present' (p. 34).

> Cathy Caruth similarly observes that 'the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event' (1995, pp. 4-5).

This broken temporality structures *Sharp Objects* as a whole, from its opening credits to its final moments. The series repeatedly collapses past and present, culminating in a final revelation that functions almost like a traumatic flashback: Amma's savage, yet sonically muted murder of the young girls after episode eight's end credits exposes the continuing effects of intergenerational trauma on children.

The opening credits sequence is particularly significant since it constitutes the spectators' entry point into the world of *Sharp Objects*, shifting the series' mood in every episode via sonic variations. Through progressive viewing, spectators are invited to recognise the now familiar images of the opening credits but are also kept at a distance by the changes in the soundtrack which defamiliarise the visuals. We are increasingly drawn into the narrative articulated by the images, which we gradually come to understand as being a retelling of the characters' trauma: the blood, the melancholic child who is in fact the dead sister killed by the mother, the fan blades referencing Camille's cuts as well as the other sharp objects inhabiting this screen

world. The changed soundtrack, however, disrupts identification with such a narrative and the characters' trauma, inviting us to feel the pain without necessarily feeling sorry for the characters nor appropriating this pain as our own. The opening credits sequence, therefore, establishes the spectatorial dynamic that structures the series as a whole: a form of 'empathic unsettlement' in which engagement and disruption remain in productive tension.

Our first encounter with *Sharp Objects* is via Waxman's original theme: a romantic, nostalgic melody that gently – and somewhat deceptively, in its tenderness – invites us into this world. This music attenuates the violent imagery of the credits which instead comes into full force in the second episode. This time, an electronic variation of Waxman's theme imbues the visual track with a menacing quality while also de-realising the images. The romantic, nostalgic world of the first opening credits now gives way to an alien world; it is the same world and yet a different one – only we still ignore how different it is. (For instance, spectators still do not know that the sophisticated Adora is also a murderer.) If the romantic music of the first opening credits kept the disparate images together in a harmonious manner, the electronic version of the second episode stresses the marked diversity of the image track, breaking the fragile linkage that the dissolves seem to establish.

After the stark contrast between the first episode's soundtrack and the second's, we encounter the piano solo version in the third episode. This rendition partially resumes the romantic style of Waxman's original theme, but at the price of augmenting its melancholic potential: here, only one instrument plays, echoing the characters' solitude – not only that of the female characters, fundamentally enclosed in their traumas and suffering, but also that of Alan (Henry Czerny), Adora's second husband and Amma's father. Alan is perhaps the most lonesome character of the whole series, trapped in a gilded imaginary past and surrounded by a female sorrow he struggles to grasp. The piano solo version makes us feel, aurally, the solitude of this screen world. Such a version parallels the solo male voice of the fifth episode; however, the sadness of the solo piano version is now replaced by a sweeter rendition through the softness and graininess of a human voice, which articulates the melody without a single word. A melancholic undertone permeates also the trip-hop version of episode six, with its hypnotic downtempo beats representative of the genre as a 'music dug up from under the earth' (Joseph Efi quoted in Muggs 2021). We are, indeed, descending into the underbelly of Wind Gap and the female household, coming closer to the horrific denouement. Appropriately, the soundtrack of episode seven's opening credits is a blend of dark jazz and ambient dream pop reminiscent of Angelo Badalamenti's scores for David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–2017) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This version creates a nostalgic, hallucinatory, and menacing atmosphere that anticipates the encounter with the end of *Sharp Objects*' world.

Thus, the variations of the credits' soundtrack each time destabilise our entry into this screen world, mingling nostalgia with threat, but also loneliness and tenderness. Then the series closes as it started, with Waxman's original theme; and yet, our perception of this music paired with this set of images has dramatically changed in the span of eight episodes because we have encountered a world of pain, violence, and trauma. Despite the same image track and soundtrack, between episode one and episode eight an entire world has irremediably collapsed. The workings of trauma are particularly palpable here in the uncomfortable coupling of sameness and difference that sonorously haunts the final opening credits sequence.

But if the soundtrack of the opening credits, with its variations, fragments *Sharp Objects*' screen world and our perception thereof, keeping spectators at a distance, the image track lures us in with extremely tactile visuals. The credits sequence opens on Alan's record player, the round shape of the vinyl returning almost obsessively in the iris shot revealing Marian swinging sadly in a garden, in the recurring shots of fan rings rapidly slashing the air (alternatively shown in a close-up outside and in a medium shot inside the pig shed), and in the circular light of the sun and car headlights. The circle shape is, however, broken abruptly throughout the credits by linear shapes, such as the green blades of grass slowly coming into and out of focus or the metallic wires in the sky and in the field. Perhaps more memorable because of its brutal sensuousness is the dark red, sticky blood dripping inexorably from a metallic hook – an image that binds together animal and human violence, and which will find an aural equivalent in the series in the pigs' screeching screams and the young girls' terrified, silenced cries in the flashback.

These diverse images comprising the visual track of the opening credits are seamlessly woven together via dissolves, in a chain of signification in which each image momentarily blurs into the next. Indeed, the choice of the dissolve is indicative of the intimate connection between the various shots since such a form of transition entails that two or more images momentarily coexist in the same frame. In this cinematic dance, one scene gracefully, albeit at times enigmatically, blends into the next. For instance, a spider tirelessly entrapping an unfortunate bug in its web is replaced, through a dissolve, by a close-up of metallic barbed wire, both so close to the camera that we can feel the difference in their respective textures. Once again, natural and human violence are contrastingly paralleled via the brief superimposition: the spider's violence for survival starkly differs from the violence implied by the human-made barbed wire crossing the field of green.

Compared to other types of editing cuts, the dissolve certainly possesses a softer, more nuanced quality (Verstraten 2009) because the screen is never black. It is no surprise, then, that this technique abounds in the credits, as it aligns with the series'

central themes: the enduring scars of trauma and the inextricable entwining of past and present, mirroring the PTSD experienced by the protagonist, Camille. In the opening credits, the dissolves carry with them a lingering quality, akin to a guest who might inadvertently overstay their welcome. As Peter Verstraten (2009) points out, after all, dissolves are the 'most commonly used convention to indicate a mental state' (p. 119). Thus, teenage bodies, including that of Amma, emerging in slow motion from the dark night against a car's lights dissolve incongruously in a broken glass through which Marian emerges, darkly, before dissolving into a shot of Camille driving, her face reflected in the car's front mirror. The three sisters, each fragilely inhabiting her own shot, are therefore inextricably bound together through dissolves.

Dissolves do more than just blend; they forge connections between elements that might otherwise remain apart. As James E. Cutting et al. (2011) aptly put it, 'whereas fades separate scenes, dissolves physically knit them together' (p. 152). James Monaco (1977) provides a fitting analogy by likening the dissolve to punctuation, noting that 'if there is a comma in film amongst its various catalog of periods, it is the dissolve... It is the one mark of punctuation that both mixes and conjoins images simultaneously' (p. 192). Thus, the starkly different images of the credits are all elements of the same long, traumatic sentence that is *Sharp Objects* itself. In many ways, the connections established by the opening credits extend to the rest of the series. They do not stay confined to the title sequence but instead anticipate the ways in which trauma itself operates throughout *Sharp Objects*, connecting together diverse bodies, memories, and generations through forms of violence that refuse to be sanitised, or remain in the past.

Women, Violence, and the Body as Living Archive

The fragmented imagery of the opening credits finds resonance in Camille's self-harm, both serving as poignant reflections of the series' exploration of psychological fragmentation and granting it thematic cohesion. A practice especially common in female adolescents and young adults (Fortune and Hawton 2005), self-cutting is understood as the act of intentional destruction of one's own body tissue without a conscious desire to die. This definition covers self-cutting using any tools but excludes body piercing and tattooing (see Kahan and Pattison 1984; Favazza 1989; Walsh and Rosen 1988). Motivations may vary, but the most frequently recurring ones include anger, low self-esteem, reaction to abandonment, and lack of ability to self-soothe (Suyemoto and Macdonald 1995). In survivors of child abuse, far from responding to a suicidal intent, this practice can come to signify 'a form of self-preservation' (Herman 2015, chapter 5) that allows survivors to feel that they exist and replaces the unbearable emotional pain with a tolerable physical one. Additionally, according to Suyemoto and Macdonald (1995), the typical self-harmer is a woman in her teenage or early adult

years, single, intelligent, and often from a middle or upper-class upbringing – a profile that Camille fits perfectly.

Camille's self-harm is one response to the intergenerational and domestic trauma that structures *Sharp Objects*. While Amma oscillates between complete submission to the mother and absolute violence against any threats to this dyadic relationship, drawing on what Herman (2015) describes as protective 'abnormal states of consciousness', adult Camille resorts to alcohol to achieve the dissociative state in which reality/memory and imagination/knowledge are protectively altered so that they can no longer harm her. But as much as she strives to banish the traumatic past from her mind, 'she continues to register its effects in her body' (Herman 2015).

What is striking about Camille's self-injuries, is that she carves fully formed words into her flesh. In particular, as the series unfolds, it becomes clear that the words engraved into her skin are largely the hurtful things that people have said about and done to her (examples include 'sick', 'wrong', 'wicked'). It would be easy to interpret her self-mutilation as the need to reassert control in the face of helplessness, or even to reclaim some of those words. However, we argue that in the protagonist's case – someone who has been so deeply misunderstood by everyone around her, and crucially, by her mother – the inscription of actual words also speaks clearly of the desire to be seen and read by the other. As Mihaela P. Harper (2020) beautifully puts it, 'expulsing the contextual definitions onto the skin renders regimes of violence legible both to Camille and to the viewer. The latter is asked—via Adams' "deeply sympathetic" portrayal—to engage along with Camille in a dangerous and therefore open to possibilities becoming-woman' (p. 147). This is best exemplified by a sequence in episode seven, 'Falling', where Camille and John Keen (Taylor John Smith), the older brother of the second victim, have intercourse. Here, John keeps whispering 'Let me see you, it's ok', while examining and caressing her scars. While Camille is initially reluctant ('John, nobody sees', her words carrying both a warning and a note of defeat), she eventually gives in to the younger man's curiosity, as she exclaims, amazed, 'You're reading me!'. Wounds in Camille's case are literal.

Camille's body remembers the trauma and maintains its wounds open. Gilles Deleuze (1968/2014) observes that '[a] scar is the sign not of a past wound but of "the present fact of having been wounded": we can say that it is the contemplation of the wound, that it contracts all the instants which separate us from it into a living present' (p. 102). Camille's scars – the written words – respond to a desire to be read (by the other; hence, to be seen) but can also provoke negative reactions such as disgust, thereby balancing between push and pull like the series' narrative and style. If, on the one hand, Camille's engraved body invites the spectator to come closer and look, namely, to feel her pain through reading, on the other hand, it is also a body that repels and pushes away.

Camille's body literally and visually stores her trauma, making her a sort of living archive of suffering. LaCapra (2001) actually makes only a brief mention of the notion of 'living archives' (p. 92) when discussing the role of witnesses to trauma. Nevertheless, we believe that such conceptualisation can easily be applied to the protagonist's predicament. Trauma, particularly extreme or violent events, can leave a lasting impact on an individual's psyche, emotions, and physical sensations. As Bessel van der Kolk observes in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015), 'being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past' (p. 53). These experiences are not simply forgotten or repressed; instead, they become inscribed in the body, shaping how individuals perceive and engage with the world. In *Sharp Objects*, Camille's body functions as a repository or archive that stores traumatic experiences and their associated affects.

While Camille's body is undoubtedly the most vivid cinematic representation of a living archive in the series, visually documenting the accumulation of traumatic experiences and their profound impacts, other women inhabiting the series' screen world embody this concept, encapsulating the enduring legacy of intergenerational trauma. Amma, in particular, uses her adolescent body – an inherently threatening, always-evolving body – in two opposing, equally disturbing ways: as a child's body, when she 'plays' Adora's sick daughter, adorned with clothes more appropriate for a younger child, and as a woman's body, taking drugs and engaging in random sex. Both performances of her self, despite their stark difference, serve to remind the audience that Amma is still a child, confused by the uncommunicated secrets and pains of her family, awkwardly attempting to embody the impossible whiteness of the clothes that Adora selects for her. Unlike Camille, who responds to trauma through avoidance, Amma remains trapped in a constant attempt to appease her abuser. Judith Herman's discussion of attachment as a coping mechanism in *Trauma and Recovery* (2015) is particularly illuminating here. As Herman argues, traumatised children often attempt to gain control by 'trying to be good' (chapter 5). Amma consistently tries 'to be good' by playing the role her mother demands of her, just as Marian did before her. Camille, by contrast, is repeatedly characterised as the daughter who refuses such compliance. Yet in this family, 'to be good' means to expose oneself to the possibility of maternal harm: Camille's only attempt to comply with Adora's expectations, in fact, almost ends in her death at the hands of her caring mother. In this context, the recurring line 'Don't tell Mama' takes on particular significance. Repeated by Amma to Camille throughout the series, the phrase becomes a chilling refrain. Despite its deceptively childlike tone, it comes to symbolise the household's pervasive culture of fear and control – a quiet yet powerful emblem of survival within a toxic familial environment.

Adora, too, is a traumatised and traumatising living archive who, differently from her daughters, succeeds in embodying an ideal Southern femininity, with her long, soft blond hair, slender figure and pastel rose gowns. However, this seemingly perfect picture is subtly undermined by her continuous headaches and bodily gestures. In addition to Munchausen by proxy, Adora exhibits symptoms of trichotillomania, an impulse control disorder characterised by the urge to pull out one's own hair. As early as episode one, 'Vanish', we see her pulling at her eyelashes – an action that she repeats, disturbingly, at various points in the series. Adora's narcissistic behaviours also emerge throughout, as she frequently laments and shows a tendency to magnify minor discomforts, turning them into major afflictions. In episode three, 'Fix', for instance, she pricks herself with a rose thorn while tending to her garden. Her response seems disproportionately dramatic: not only does she cast blame upon Camille ('Look what you've done!'), but she also has Alan wrap the minor wound in an excessive amount of gauze, all while incessantly voicing her grievances, to the point that even some of her townsfolk feel compelled to inquire after her well-being. This feels darkly ironic when one considers how her own daughter hides her body, marked as it is by painful scars.

In the novel, Gillian Flynn offers her own explanation for such widespread occurrences and the ailments that appear to affect women in such a disproportionate manner compared to men. She writes:

> Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many *sick* women all my life. Women with chronic pain, with ever-gestating diseases. Women with *conditions*. Men, sure, they have bone snaps, they have backaches, they have a surgery or two, yank out a tonsil, insert a shiny plastic hip. Women get *consumed*. (2007, p. 262; original emphasis)

How deeply violence is embedded both in Camille's family and the town of Wind Gap becomes clear if we consider episode five, titled 'Closer.' This episode articulates the perpetuation of violence against women in the series by contextualising the genesis of such violence within an exploration of the town's historical backdrop. As Wind Gap readies to observe 'Calhoun Day,' an annual festivity commemorating its Confederate heritage, the narrative unveils the story of the town's founder, Zeke Calhoun. As Camille tells detective Richard Willis (Chris Messina), Zeke Calhoun, a Confederate soldier, married a young woman named Millie. When Union soldiers attempted to capture Calhoun, they subjected Millie to a brutal assault after she refused to disclose his whereabouts, resulting in the loss of her unborn child.

Camille's choice of language to describe the event is certainly significant. She labels Calhoun as 'our founding paedophile', highlighting the considerable age gap between

him and Millie. More importantly for the purposes of this article, she refers to Millie as the 'great-great-great-grand victim,' establishing a clear connection among the women of Wind Gap across generations, and emphasising the pervasive nature of violence against women throughout the town's history. As Harper (2020) eloquently puts it, '*Sharp Objects* captures the reverberations of violence, external and internalized, against others and against themselves, of women since the 1860s' (p.151).

Everything in the series, then, seems to point to the inescapability of inherited, breathed-in, learnt trauma: violence begets violence, and Wind Gap's women remain both its victims and enforcers. Flynn's haunting line in the novel – 'A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort' (2007, p. 320) – finds full expression here, as Amma, and Camille before her, internalises pain and abuse as the language of love. Indeed, 'scars can be passed from generation to generation, making them polytemporal in the sense that they refer not just to one past but many' (Hodgin and Thakkar 2017, p. 19). Far from being a disconnected, discrete examination of individual pathology, *Sharp Objects* offers a sustained meditation on how systems of violence – historical, familial, and gendered – embed themselves firmly and insidiously in the fabric of everyday life, taking root quietly in gestures, silences, and the body itself, where they endure, often unnoticed, and resist unravelling. Through the shared experiences spanning generations, *Sharp Objects* transcends individual narratives to become a poignant exploration of the collective struggles faced by women over decades (see also Harper 2020; Janzen 2022), interrogating both the violence inflicted upon women and the ways it is recycled, often unconsciously, within cycles of care.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that LaCapra's notion of 'empathic unsettlement' is particularly relevant to explore spectatorial engagement in audiovisual media centred on trauma and suffering. By maintaining a fundamental tension between feeling-with and the irreducible otherness of another's pain, 'empathic unsettlement' provides a means to analyse how a screen world narratively invites viewers to affectively engage with difference while aesthetically preventing over-identification with someone else's trauma. *Sharp Objects* illuminates this idea through its narrative and style, pulling us so close to the characters that we can feel their pain and yet pushing us away so that we are always aware that this pain is not our own. This approach to empathy in cinema destabilises the often-safe position occupied by viewers of someone else's suffering. *Sharp Objects* reminds us, narratively and stylistically, of the incommensurable distance – physical, geopolitical, temporal, and in the degree of suffering – between us spectators and the women of Wind Gap while also allowing us to come close enough to feel with or for them.

While existing scholarship on *Sharp Objects* has primarily focused on the traumatic narrative, the complex characterisation and unlikeable traits of the female leads, and the visual blending of memory, reality, and hallucination, we have examined the formal and affective strategies through which the series structures a spectatorial encounter with the traumatised other. In doing so, this article suggests that LaCapra's notion of 'empathic unsettlement' offers a productive lens not only for understanding *Sharp Objects*, but also for analysing audiovisual representations of trauma more broadly. Alongside existing scholarship that has explored empathy in film as ethical response, we have proposed a framework that foregrounds the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of spectatorship.

In *Sharp Objects* this is no easy encounter, since the women at the centre of the narrative are all marked by trauma. Throughout much of the series, spectators are encouraged to recognise the suffering that shapes Adora, Amma, and Camille, even as it takes radically different forms. 'Empathic unsettlement', however, is not distributed equally across these characters. The ending of *Sharp Objects* offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this dynamic. While the final episode continues to invite affective proximity to Camille, it simultaneously complicates spectators' responses to Adora and Amma. Indeed, Adora's last appearance, doubly framed through a prison screen and separated from both Camille and the spectator, combines physical distance with a tearful, subdued vulnerability that resists any straightforward condemnation. By contrast, the frenzied editing accompanying the revelation of Amma's savage murders cannot but repel in its content and form.

Significantly, the series unfolds through what are effectively three endings. The conventional closing scene before the credits focuses on the two sisters and the revelation, culminating in Amma's final iteration of 'Don't tell mama'. Mid-way through the end-credit sequence comes the fast-paced, tightly framed, sonically muted montage of Amma's savage murders. Finally, in a post-credit shot reserved for the patient spectator, Amma, dressed in a long, white dress, turns and disappears into the woods as 'the woman in white'. Having just witnessed her brutality, we are left not with the image of a monster but with that of a damaged child. The series, thus, preserves the tension at the heart of 'empathic unsettlement', here pushed to a disturbing point in the visual and narrative collision between the violence of the flashback and the visual purity of the afterimage. This concluding image of an impossible whiteness encourages 'empathic unsettlement' whereby spectators neither excuse Amma's actions nor reduce her exclusively to them.

The tension between disruption and engagement is articulated not only through dialogue, narrative revelation, and the jarring relationship between image and sound,

but also through the different ways in which the female body stores and expresses trauma. Camille, Adora, and Amma thus emerge as living archives of suffering, each bearing distinct corporeal traces of traumatic experience. Camille's carnally carved words, Adora's eyelashes and headaches, and Amma's body trapped between childhood and womanhood all meaningfully convey the intergenerational violence that permeates this screen world. This is perhaps best encapsulated in the series' most resonant verbal repetition: 'Don't tell mama' – at once a claim to sisterly love and innocent secrets, and a painful reminder that there cannot be innocence here; it is too late for something 'to be good'.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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