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Theme and Complex Narrative Structure in HBO's Big Little Lies (2017)

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Abstract

This article uses narrative analysis and screenwriting theory to explore how the theme of domestic violence and bullying is used to drive the narrative of the seven-episode HBO limited television series, *Big Little Lies* (2017). In doing so, it applies Porter et al.'s (2002) structuralist analytic narrative tool, the Scene Function Model, to investigate the structuring of complex TV. Drawing on the narrative and aesthetics of the domestic noir genre, this female-driven drama revolves around a 'big little lie' that drives the series narrative and connects each of the five individual stories of the series. This article explores the relationship between plotting complex narratives and the expression of theme in TV drama as a hallmark of Mittell's (2006, 2015) concept of complex television. It also considers how the creators of *Big Little Lies* used the theme of domestic violence to drive the narrative of the television series, and via a series of complex interweaving 'kernel' scene functions, connect and reveal the lies beneath the surface, so essential to the genre of domestic noir.

Key words: screenwriting, narrative, theme, complex television, *Big Little Lies*

Introduction

The seven-episode HBO Limited television series *Big Little Lies* (2017) won critical acclaim. Drawing on the narrative and aesthetics of the domestic noir and crime genres, this female-driven drama won eight American Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Limited Series. Writer David E. Kelly received a nomination for his work and Director Jean-Marc Vallée and actors Nicole Kidman, Alexander Skarsgard and Laura Dern won awards in their individual categories.

Big Little Lies is adapted from the Australian author Liane Moriarty's book of the same name and is set in the tranquil seaside town of Monterey, California. The telling of *Big Little Lies* exposes what lies beneath the perfect world of immaculate mothers in beautiful homes with successful husbands and adorable children. The 'big little lie' that drives the series narrative is domestic and family violence – the theme that intersects and connects each individual story in the series. Vallée says the series is about "People trying to be happy. Raising kids. And how lies affect your life ... And we have this dirty secret" ("*Big Little Lies* Interview").

This multilayered series, centred on the investigation of a crime at the local school's annual trivia night, is told through the eyes of three mothers: Madeline (Reese Witherspoon), Celeste (Nicole Kidman) and Jane (Shailene Woodley). In the tradition of domestic noir, these characters are all trapped in some way with troubled families and dark secrets that wait to be revealed. Domestic noir has its antecedents in film noir and the literary crime genre, and

Takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. (Peters 12)

This article is the first in a series of articles that will consider how HBO and the creators of *Big Little Lies* explore the challenges in the domestic sphere for its female protagonists, and use theme, structure, aesthetics and metaphor to showcase "controversy, provocative content and thought-provoking television" involving "contentious subject matter and edgy scripts containing adult themes" (McCabe and Akass 88). It will use narrative analysis and screenwriting theory to explore how the thematic of domestic violence and bullying is used to drive the narrative of the television series. In doing so it will apply Porter et al.'s (2002) structuralist analytic narrative tool, the Scene Function Model to consider the relationship between plotting complex narratives and the expression of theme in TV drama.

In the first part of this paper I define and consider what is meant by Mittell's (2006, 2015) concept of "narrative complexity" and the narrative markers that are understood as some of its hallmarks. To investigate the structuring of complex TV, I give an overview of the relevant narrative and screenwriting theory. Finally, by applying elements of the Scene Function Model, I analyse how the first episode of *Big Little Lies* is structured and how each of the key storylines interacts and inflects aspects of the theme of domestic violence including physical violence, rape and bullying.

Theme, complex TV and narrative complexity

Theme is what the story is "about". The central theme of *Big Little Lies* discussed in this paper is domestic violence. As Batty notes, this "about" is "deeper than the surface story" and "has a sensibility that drives a screenplay" (5). For Robert McKee, what the story is "about" is the *controlling idea*, "the story's ultimate meaning expressed through action and aesthetic emotion of the last act's climax" (112). As Batty notes, the "controlling idea is the same as theme: it names a story's root or central idea" (5);

"It captures a tacit feeling and helps us to understand the intention of everything seen and heard" (5).

In his seminal article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television" (2006), critical television theorist Jason Mittell terms "narrative complexity" as incorporating the "dual demands of serial and episodic pleasures derived from both the standalone episode of a show in a TV series and the episodic ongoing narrative and character development of the soap opera" (32-33). Mittell notes that prior to the advent of narrative complexity, that in "conventional television narratives that feature A and B plots the two stories may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to one another, but they rarely interact at the level of action" (34). More recently in the volume *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2015), Mittell asserts that complex TV "refines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (18).

Given narrative complexity, how do we understand how the stories develop in *Big Little Lies* to reflect the theme of domestic violence? This is one of the major complexities of screenwriting for contemporary complex multistory series TV. Writer of the Australian TV series *Safe Harbour* (2018), Belinda Chayko, observed that "because of the complexity of the story, they plotted both a past and present storyline, and one of the biggest challenges was figuring out the balance" ("Scripting *Safe Harbour*").

As noted above, understanding and writing for narrative complexity will be discussed in this article in terms of narrative and screenwriting theory. It will also draw on the field of critical television studies that, rather than focus on the structural aspects of storytelling, offers us a way to consider theme as it has emerged from the "twin paradigms of mass communications and cultural studies, both of which tend to foreground social impacts over aesthetic analysis" (Mittell 30).

Narrative theory and writing for series TV

Narratology considers a narrative as a chain of events linked by cause and effect. Derived from the work of the structuralist narratologist Vladimir Propp and the Russian formalists and developed in the work of structuralist Seymour Chatman (1994), it proposes methods for segmenting elements that are useful for mapping narrative structure. In screenwriting theory, the smallest element of the plot is termed a story "beat" that does not take into account structure, while in narratology the smallest elements are kernels that encompass elements of plot as well as structure.

The use of [narratology](#) or narrative theory to study storytelling in series TV, as Porter et al. note, is as yet an underdeveloped field (23). Jane Feuer has argued that "Narrative theory has been used primarily to examine linear, finite narratives such as novels or films" (139). The definitive work in applying narratology to the study of television series is Sarah Kozloff's "Narrative Theory and Television" in Robert C. Allen's *Channels of Discourse Reassembled* (1997). Kozloff investigates the question of "What qualities are specific to television narrative?" but overall her work is concerned with a discussion of television in the formalist tradition of story – the plot – and discourse or narrative; the way the plot is arranged as an investigation of the general characteristics of television narrative (87-92).

More recently, Allrath and Gymnich's edited collection *Narrative Strategies in Television Series* (2005) specifically focused on aligning the study of television narrative structure with principles of narratology.

They acknowledge Kozloff's earlier work in the field but their aim is to provide a narratological analysis of specific TV narratives "To explore both the wide range of narrative forms TV series have made use of in recent years [pre-2005] and the complex interplay between form and content" (3) rather than detailed case studies around narrative structure and screenwriting.

Screenwriting theory, critical television studies and writing for series television

Television narratives present a special case in structuring story for the screen. While there has been much written in terms of manuals of screenwriting for film, the critical literature around screenwriting for contemporary television series such as *Big Little Lies* is also an emerging field. In the film and television and cultural studies arena, there exists an established literature regarding the emergence of "quality television" which, as Leverette et al. (2008) propose, has resulted in more creative, risk-taking content, structure and style and auteur-driven complex narrative scenarios for series TV storytelling. These include, for example, studies around the rise of cable TV giants such as HBO as insightfully overviewed in Leverette et al.'s *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (2008) and Edgerton and Jones's *The Essential HBO Reader* (c. 2009). An emerging body of literature is also being established around the topic of audience engagement in television series, particularly with anti-heroes. This includes Mittell's aforementioned *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2015), which provides a comprehensive overview of the development of serial TV narrative in the past two decades. Mittell's study is based on David Bordwell's concept of cognitive poetics (1989) and makes reference to a number of key TV serial dramas including *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos*, and includes a delimited study of audience engagement with serial narrative.

From the craft perspective of screenwriting for television, Aronson's *Television Writing: The Ground Rules of Series, Serials and Sitcom* (2000a) remains a classic "how to" text for writing multiple storylines for series TV – even though the text is now somewhat dated. With the emergence of the *Journal of Screenwriting* (2010), an academic body of work around screenwriting has also been established. However only a handful of articles specifically focus on matters relating to writing for series TV in the "quality television" era. These include studies around storylining and audience engagement in Russo's discussion of the successful Italian TV series *Gomorra* in "Storylining Engagement with Repulsive Antiheroes. Towards a Cognitive Poetics of TV Serial Drama Narrative: The Case of *Gomorra – The Series*" (2017); studies around character transformation in O'Meara's "Changing the Way We Think About Character Change in Episodic Television Series" (2015); and Novrup Redvall and Sabroe's work on "Production Design as a Storytelling Tool in the Writing of the Danish TV Drama Series, *The Legacy*" (2016). In addition, Redvall's earlier book, part of the dedicated Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting series *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark from the Kingdom to the Killing* (2013), considers the writing and development of the powerful and successful Nordic noir TV series genre.

However, screenwriting theory does provide a number of ways of thinking about segmenting story when plotting complex narratives that run in linear screen time. Aronson provides tools to think about writing story strands for series television in terms of A, B and C stories and their ratio of screen time as a reflection of their story importance (5). However, while Aronson (2000b, 2010) has written about

writing complex narrative structures for multi-strand narrative in film, to date no theorist as written about structuring television narrative at the micro level of the thematic and the story segment.

The scene function model and complex storytelling in series television

To understand the narrative complexity of the domestic violence strand developed across multiple storylines as the focus of this paper, we therefore need a more detailed analytic tool. Mittell notes that “When we talk about a serialized program, we are usually referring less to the ubiquitous persistence of storyworld and characters and more to the ongoing accumulation of narrative events” (“Complex TV Poetics” 22-23). To understand this ongoing “accumulation of events”, in this paper I deploy the very able and under-recognised analytical tool, the Scene Function Model, to examine the narrative function and structure of *Big Little Lies*. In later studies I aim to adapt the Scene Function Model to analyse how storylines intersect, as well as investigate the use of aesthetics and metaphor. This in turn will provide an analytical and craft tool for screenwriters to use in the development of narratives for television.

In “Re-defining Narrative Events: Examining Television Narrative Structure”, Porter et al. propose the Scene Function Model to investigate “How a scene enhances various storylines, adds to the layers of meaning embedded in a single scene, and engages viewers with different levels of commitment in the series” (25). The model, developed from Chatman’s work, is designed to provide a clearer understanding of the structure of television narrative by considering the narrative function of television scenes by dividing them into *kernel* (scenes core to the narrative) and *satellites* (scenes less essential to the narrative) (23). Mittell also proposes the notion of kernels that are central to the narrative and satellites that enrich the narrative derived from Chatman’s work (“Complex TV Poetics” 23-24).

As a tool for the analysis of a television series story, Porter et al.’s Scene Function Model “Identifies specific, discrete narrative functions within a scene that show *how* [sic] those scenes advance or enhance the narrative. The instrument requires the user to ask the basic question: What is the function/purpose of this scene for the telling of the story?” (25). Porter et al. propose:

An analysis of the narrative structure of a television drama helps one see more clearly that this television series is a combination of individual stories, some self-contained (the A and B stories) and others represented in an elliptical manner (the C story). The presence of story segments (D and E) tells us that this episode assumes some of the characteristics that define serial television, such as the use of continuous storylines. (26)

Like Aronson, Porter et al. note that the A and B stories provide the first narrative layer and that the C, D, E stories “Focus on character development and relationship affirmation ... on how characters interact with each other, how they overcome obstacles, and how the ongoing relationships are developing” (29).

In this study, the first and last episodes of *Big Little Lies* will be examined to reflect on the way in which the A, B, C, D and E stories figure in terms of narrative importance and their contribution to theme. The episodes will be examined at the level of scene or kernel as outlined in Porter et al.’s model (below). In Porter et al.’s model, the six *kernel* scene and core narrative functions are: disturbance, obstacle,

complication, confrontation, crisis, and resolution (26). According to Porter et al., *satellite* scenes are not superfluous, while they do not move the story along the story path, they make the story “richer and fuller” (26). This article will apply the notion of the kernel scene. In later articles, I will consider the notion of the satellite scene as it enriches the story via metaphor and aesthetics.

In applying the Scene Function Model as an analytic tool to understand the writing and telling of complex stories, we may ask:

- Whose story is being told?
- What do we learn from this scene?
- Why is this scene here?

Storylining for series TV and narrative structure

The basic modus operandi of television serial storytelling “Creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time” (“Complex TV Poetics” 10). Aronson notes the TV series presents the audience with a family and a village:

A community with its own style and concerns ... A group of compelling, clearly delineated characters (usually about seven in a drama series ...) which functions like a family and demonstrates a range of ongoing problems, conflicts and ambivalences that are capable, if necessary, of being revisited every episode for three to five seasons. (3)

In *Big Little Lies*, the narrative world is the upmarket world of the mothers at the schoolyard gate and the community of Monterey. As David E. Kelley, screenwriter of *Big Little Lies* notes, it is “A story about community. Love. Marriage. Relationships and how messy that equation can get” (*Big Little Lies* Inside Episode 1).

In the pre-title sequence, repeated for each of the seven episodes, we meet these mothers and their children as they drive to the first day of school. Madeline Martha Mackenzie and her daughters, Abigail Carlson (her first daughter) and Chloe Mackenzie (her second daughter); Celeste Wright and her sons Josh and Max Wright; and Jane Chapman and her son Ziggy. These are the key characters around whom the interweaving stories of the stories will revolve – as for any series – *Big Little Lies* will be driven by the “stories that exist to bring about catharsis or conflict between the regular characters” (Aronson 3).

The narrative primacy of these three story strands is set up in this introductory sequence. Story A is that of Madeline, busybody and heart-of-gold motor mouth who knows or tries to know what everyone is doing. She is the link character across all stories. Story B is that of ex-lawyer Celeste, the perfect wife and mother, and her controlling husband and seemingly perfect twin boys. Story C is that of Jane who moves from town to town, the working-class single mother with her son born of rape. After the opening credits and as the mothers take their children into the school, the D and E stories unfold as we brush past them on the way through the schoolyard gate. Story D is that of Renata Klein (Laura Dern),

the high-powered IT CEO who is taking a day off work to take her child to school. Story E is that of laid-back hippie and earth mother Bonnie (Zoe Kravitz), the second wife of Madeline's ex-husband Nathan. In terms of TV series storytelling, this aligns with Aronson's suggestion that the traditional narrative structure evidences two-to-three key stories embroidered with stories of lesser characters – the A story being the most important and the B story more important than the C story (5).

In a television series, for Aronson, the main storylines run across the series via the series arc that spans and develops across the season and involves the emotional lives of the regular characters and culminates in a suspenseful climax (33). *Big Little Lies* is a limited series comprising seven episodes of approximately 52-58 minutes' duration each as below:

1. *Somebody's Dead*
2. *Serious Mothering*
3. *Living the Dream*
4. *Push Comes to Shove*
5. *Once Bitten*
6. *Burning Love*
7. *You Get What You Need.*

In the suburban noir genre element of *Big Little Lies*, in each story a secret or lie – a facet of the domestic violence theme – is revealed (see table 1 below). In the crime genre element, the investigation of the crime provides the series arc and the tension and suspense leading to Episode 7: *You Get What You Need*, where all of the personal story arcs come to a resolution with the climax and denouement. This is typical of the television series where Aronson notes "The series arc needs to be considered in conjunction with the main story for each episode. Its progression needs to be planned with care. Suspense should be factored in" (33).

A detailed analysis of Episode 1: *Somebody's Dead* is conducted with reference to how each of the story strands in the series are set up. This will be concluded by a discussion how these stories are tied together via the climax and conclusion in the final episode, Episode 7: *You Get What You Need*.

Episode 1: Somebody's Dead

According to Mittell, in complex TV "Most episodes begin with some crucial markers, such as recaps of previous events, an opening title sequence of variable length, and credits that might run over the titles or early scenes" ("Complex TV Poetics" 27). This is the case for *Big Little Lies*. The pre-title prologue of each episode of *Big Little Lies* is the same. The opening soul song, *Cold Little Heart* (Michael Kiwanuka), sets up mood, tone and characters in the three key stories. As noted above, we meet three women whom we later learn are Madeline, Celeste and Jane, all in profile and intercut in close-up with vistas of the Monterey coast line as they drive to school.

We see a parade of innocent kids, the children of five key female characters, at school running towards us. This is followed by a parade of mothers dressed as either Audrey Hepburn or in fancy dress costume walking towards the camera. Under are the lyrics to the title song "Did you ever want it? Did

you ever try to hide it? It's all the same". There follows a montage of close-ups of crashing surf and the first portent of unease: a hand cocking a gun. Then we cut again to the parade of the mothers in Audrey Hepburn costume at the trivia night walking to camera. Fade to and up from black to flashing police lights, heavy breathing, whip-pan glimpses of: a still of a crudely drawn Elvis, people standing as if in shock looking on, snippets of voiceover, flashes of images.

As befits the crime genre, we see a man and a woman who we find are police investigators – the man is the first character to speak: "Is this a costume night or somethin' any witnesses?". We learn that a murder has occurred at the trivia night of a Monterey public school but the victim or murderer is not revealed. The cop says there is "Not a lot of clarity" and indeed, even at the end of Episode 7, there is no clarity as to who has committed the murder.

We cut to close-ups of police interviewing unknown people who relate their interpretation of the event. But what they really reveal is the festering atmosphere of competition and the upkeep of the perfect facade that drives the women who impel this story, leading into the comment, "Now the root of it was Madeline Mackenzie".

In a setup that reflects the complex interweaving nature of characters appearing in multiple stories, we cut back to the women driving to school. We see Madeline driving with her daughter. She pulls up a car of misbehaving teenagers who include her own daughter, and she rolls her ankle. She is picked up by Jane, who is with her son Ziggy. Madeline is fascinated with Jane. Witherspoon notes: "She knows there is some sort of secret going on and Madeline likes to know everybody's secret" ("*Big Little Lies* Inside Episode 1"). This is story B meeting story C.

We then meet Celeste at home in her perfect mansion with her husband Perry, and the kids who are playing with guns. The song "Victim of Love" plays in the background. Celeste and Perry seem to be deeply in love. Actor Alexander Skasgard, who plays Perry, notes:

Perry and Celeste have a passionate love life. He lives in this incredible house up in Monterey. It's the perfect life. Then towards the end of the first episode, there's a moment where it gets a little darker – you realize that there's another side to Perry. ("*About Big Little Lies*")

The central theme – hidden domestic violence and bullying in the genre of the suburban noir is central to Celeste's story and the murder – in this limited series is not solved. The script's big print (screen action) for this episode reads:

This is scary now. Could it actually get violent? Finally, he releases. She holds a dagger-glare, then exits the room (*Big Little Lies* Script 126).

The episode concludes with an elliptical end. Wipe of footsteps on beach. Montage: Close on Renata. Close on Celeste. Close on Jane. Close on Madeline.

All these stories are resolved in Episode 7: *You Get What You Need*, which extends over the day of the trivia night and culminates in the murder of Perry. In story B, Celeste is beaten again and decides to leave Perry. In story C, Ziggy confesses to Jane that it was Max, Celeste's son, who choked Annabella and that he has also been violent towards Skye, Bonnie's daughter. In story C meets story B, Jane tells Celeste her son Max is a bully and Celeste goes home to ask Max to be truthful to her. In story B, Perry sees a text on Celeste's phone from her new landlady and he confronts her on the way to the party. Perry tries to stop Celeste leaving the car when they get to the party but she escapes. In story B meets story D, at the party, Celeste avoids Perry and tells Renata that Max is the bully.

In the climax of Episode 7, in story A, Madeline is drunk and runs away from Ed. In story C, Jane goes after her and finds her crying at the top of a set of concrete stairs. In story D, Renata also goes after them and apologises to Jane for blaming Ziggy for the bullying. In story B, Celeste joins them but is followed by Perry. In story E, Bonnie has been following Celeste and Perry from a distance because she noticed them arguing. It is then that Jane realises that Perry is the man who raped her. All the women converge on him. Perry pleads to Celeste to come back to him and when she says "No", he attacks Madeline. Jane and Renata try to hold Perry back. Bonnie rushes in and pushes Perry down the stairs. He is killed.

In the resolution we see the bookend scene mirroring the opening. The police interviews continue. The five women all confirm there was a fight with Perry but that he fell accidentally. Nothing can be proved because their stories match. There is no closure as to who committed the crime. In an echo of the policeman looking on in the first scene of Episode 1, we close in on the women together frolicking on the beach with the policeman watching them through binoculars. It would seem that despite everything, the sisterhood are going to stick together to deny any knowledge of who committed the murder. For director Jean-Marc Vallée, this underlines one of the promises of the series, "The female solidarity that is so strong and powerful. I mean that explains everything" ("*Big Little Lies* Interview"). Likewise, for Nicole Kidman, executive producer and lead as Celeste, "You can laugh with them and play with them. All of the violence and complications intertwine into their relationship" ("*About Big Little Lies*").

Theme and scene function in complex narrative TV

In the table below, I apply the Scene Function Model to illustrate how each of the A, B, C, D and E storylines of *Big Little Lies* investigates and reflects the domestic violence thematic. This is followed by a summary analysis of the scene function of the kernel scenes and the thematic purpose of each storyline.

Table 1

Storylines and Theme *Big Little Lies*

Episode 1: *Somebody's Dead*

TITLE SONG: *Cold Little Heart* lyrics: Did you ever want it? Did you want it bad? Tears me apart. We try to hide it. It's all the same ... I know in this world I can leave or I can lie ... can you believe in your lies ...?

| Scene Functions | Story A Madeline | Story B Celeste | Story C Jane | Story D Renata | Story E Bonnie |
|--|--|---|---|---|---|
| GENRE/ NARRATIVE PURPOSE/ THEME | Genre: Suburbannoir, crime Portfolio story linking all other stories | Genre: Suburban noir, crime Theme: Domestic violence | Genre: Suburban noir, crime Theme: Bullying & Rape | Genre: Suburban noir Theme: Bullying | Genre: Crime climax Foil: a happy marriage |
| PROLOGUE & TITLES | Stay-at-home Mum driving kids to school | Stay-at-home Mum driving kids to school | Mum driving kids to school | | |
| KERNEL SCENES | | | | | |
| Disturbance | Madeline turns her ankle, meets Jane who helps and befriends her | Celeste and her husband Perry seem too "loved up". Kids are playing with guns and won't stop | Jane helps Madeline by giving her a lift to school | Renata's daughter Annabella is bullied | Madeline finds it difficult to be civil to Bonnie |
| Obstacle | Madeline is worried she is not making the most of life as a stay- at-home Mum although she runs the community theatre and her children will leave her soon | Celeste appears uncomfortable. We don't know why | Jane is a single Mum and outsider | Renata tells her husband she is not liked because she has a career | Bonnie & Nathan want Abigail to be with them more |
| Complications | Bonnie & Nathan want Abigail to be | Perry comes home early from business trip. He finds out about bullying accusation and demands his boys | Jane's son Ziggy is accused of bullying Annabella. Jane hugs | He reaffirms she doesn't | Bonnie lets Madeline know |

| | | | | | |
|------------|--|---|--|--|---|
| | with them more | don't mix with the violent kid Ziggy. Perry teases Celeste with fright. Perry reads scary stories to his sons | Ziggy at home at night when he wakes her in bed | want others to be envious | there is a petition to stop her play |
| Crisis | Madeline is afraid of losing her daughter to Bonnie. She wants her to get a good education and be an independent woman | Perry grabs Celeste to demand she do as he says and she tells him to "remove his fucking hand" | | | |
| Resolution | Abigail and Madeline have a lovely discussion about growing up at night while piano plays | Ongoing | Ongoing | Ongoing | Ongoing |
| THEMATIC | Hiding truth of her perfect life | Celeste is the victim of domestic violence. Perry commits domestic violence and is the rapist. Son Max is the bully | Jane has been raped and Ziggy is the child born of rape. Ziggy accused of bullying Renata's daughter | Daughter Annabelle is bullied at school. Renata: "Little boys don't get to go around anymore hurting little girls" | The accidental murderer. Bonnie tells Nathan "None of us see things as they really are" |

In the Scene Function Model, Porter et al. propose that the A and B stories of a television series form the first narrative layer and the C, D, E stories "focus on character development and relationship affirmation ... on how characters interact with each other, how they overcome obstacles, and how the ongoing relationships are developing" (29). In the above analysis, we can see that this is the case in *Big Little Lies*. In story A, Madeline's actions link all the stories and impel the narrative of this episode. Through her, we meet all the other characters and their stories are interwoven with hers, allowing us, as Porter et al. propose, to see how relationships between the stories and characters develop (29). Madeline introduces us to Jane's story, story C, as Madeline travels to school with her daughter on the

first day of school when Jane stops to help her after she has twisted her ankle. Through this new friendship, we are introduced to story B, that of Celeste, who is also taking her twin boys to school.

While the theme of story A, Madeline's story, revolves around the domestic noir concept of hidden secrets – in this case the fact that Madeline's life is not as perfect as it seems – the central thematic of domestic violence is ancillary to the main narrative action of Madeline's story, which in this episode revolves around her relationship with her daughter. On the other hand, *Big Little Lies'* central thematic – hidden domestic violence and bullying in the genre of the suburban noir, is central to story B – Celeste's story and the murder – which in this limited series is not solved. In story B we learn Celeste is the victim of domestic violence. This is underlined in her story by the perpetuation of this violence in the bullying one of her sons commits at school, as we learn in Episode 7. The hidden domestic violence theme and bullying is also echoed in each of the other stories (table 1). In story D, that of tech CEO and working mum Renata Klein, Renata accuses Jane's son Ziggy of bullying. The story of who the bully actually is impels much of the narrative action of Renata and her daughter Annabelle's story, and is not solved until the final episode, when we learn that it is Celeste and Perry's son Max who is the actual bully. This is the D story meeting the B and C stories. Later, in a further underlining of the theme across the story strands, we also learn in story C that Jane has been raped. Even later we learn, in story B meeting story C, that Celeste's husband Perry is the rapist and still later, when all the stories interconnect for the climax in Episode 7, the murder victim.

The above analysis demonstrates the central story functions of kernel narrative scenes as proposed by the Scene Function Model. The A and B stories are the most dominant. Madeline's A story is the portfolio story linking all others. However, in addition as has been discussed, it also allows us a way of conceptualising the core theme of hidden domestic violence. We can see that while Celeste's B story has narrative importance, it is also the key story where the action occurs around domestic violence. In addition, Jane's C story also plays an important role both narratively and thematically, albeit with less narrative primacy than the A and B stories.

Conclusion

In discussing the narrative and genre elements of complex TV, Mittell emphasises:

Complex television is not a genre ... [it] is a storytelling mode and set of associated production and reception practices that span wide range of programs across an array of genres ... Complex television is a site of tremendous genre mixing, where conventions and assumptions from a range of programming categories come together and are interwoven, merged and reformed. ("Complex TV Poetics" 233)

The challenge is to understand how these genre and narrative conventions are interwoven, merged and reformed. The Scene Function Model provides a way of thinking about the key narrative scenes, the kernel scenes, and illuminates the fact that in the complex cinematic storytelling of a television series such as *Big Little Lies*, each of the stories may provide thematic resonance and be instrumental in the cause-and-effect plot chain. Overall, an analysis of the kernel scenes of stories A, B and C in *Big*

Little Lies evidences their narrative primacy, with A and B stories given more screen time and the central relationship in each of these stories the focus of the first episode. The D and E stories are not overly developed, with scenes playing out more to underline the themes of the A, B and C stories rather than as discrete stories within themselves.

In *Big Little Lies*, the theme of domestic violence and its repercussions, and the lies that hide this stark reality in the domestic sphere, impel the narrative. In this article, the narrative and thematic attributes that are central to the “storytelling mode” of “complex television” have been conceptualised by the application of Porter et al.’s Scene Function Model. This has enabled a consideration of how the elements of the domestic noir and crime genres may be interwoven in the narrative structure of episodes across a limited TV series.

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