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1. Introduction

*The Handmaid's Tale*¹ is a TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel² set in a future where the United States of America are being governed by authoritarian puritans who tackle environmental and fertility crises by enslaving women and eradicating freedom in society. Since its premiere on *Hulu*, *The Handmaid's Tale* gained almost universal acclaim from critics and the public for its topicality and aesthetic qualities. Additionally, it has caused a strong emotional reaction from the viewers in response to the scope of distress inflicted by the series. Numerous internet discussions and reviews of the new adaptation have included descriptions of the horrifying experience of watching it that verges on "emotional self-harm",³ which led many to call *The Handmaid's Tale* "the scariest"⁴ fiction TV drama of recent years.

For the study of film art it is of great interest to analyze storytelling strategies responsible for the show's non-average emotional influence on the audience. The present master's thesis argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* achieves this effect by forcing a strong engagement with the main character and employing a substantial number of tools that elicit intense and continuous empathy. In line with this premise, the objective of this work is to study the show's narrative and cinematic techniques and explain how they stimulate an empathic response in viewers.

The object of the study is limited to seasons one and two of the series, and is focused solely on the figure of the protagonist who is argued to be the main channel of empathy in the show.

The main research question of this study is, What storytelling techniques in the series *The Handmaid's Tale* elicit empathy in the viewer and what role does empathy play in the experience of spectatorship of the series?

Other questions related to this study are: What is empathy and what role does it play in the viewer's experience of film spectatorship? What role does the subjectivity and identification play in the process of empathy? Which film techniques elicit empathy in the viewer and why?

¹ *The Handmaid's Tale*, creator: Bruce Miller, US 2017.

² Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, London: Virago Press Limited 1987.

³ Laura Hudson et al., "Is *The Handmaid's Tale* still worth the agony of watching it? Enduring Season 2 of the *Hulu* series proves even harder than expected", *The Verge*, 27.04.2018, www.theverge.com/2018/4/27/17285182/handmaids-tale-season-2-hulu, 10.03.2020.

⁴ Jo Berry, "The *Handmaid's Tale* season 2, episode 3 confirms it as the scariest show on TV. How did we get here?", *Digital Spy*, 05.02.2018, www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a856171/the-handmaids-tale-season-2-episode-3-spoilers-review/, 10.03.2020.

Dealing with these questions, we will inevitably touch upon the problematic nature of the notion of empathy in regard to the concept of identification which is a common stumbling block in the academic discussion of film emotions. This study illuminates the basic discord in the application of the term and highlights the need for a responsible use of terminology employed in the film theory and analysis.

The value of this research is determined by the fact that while empathy is one of the fundamental and crucial cinematic experiences, it remains considerably understudied. Specifically, it is a lack of examples, analyses, and methodology of locating empathic cues within the cinematic narration that hinders a comprehensive understating of the concept and its role in the experience of film spectatorship. This study gives a broad outlook on the phenomenon of cinematic empathy, provides more context and examples of empathy-inducing storytelling strategies in film and television, and offers an explanation of mechanisms behind the viewer's empathic experience. In doing so, this research aims at contributing to a better understanding of film emotions and to the overall media literacy, while also commencing a discussion of the *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale*, which, as a relatively new series, has not yet gotten much attention in academic studies. Also, given the philosophical and socially impactful subject matter of the *Hulu* adaptation, we can explore the viewer's response and the show's success against the backdrop of the current time and place in history: starting 2016 as the worldwide political landscape became a fruitful ground for a comeback of the Atwood's classic dystopia.

Structure and Methodology

The theoretical part of the study throughout chapter two is a comprehensive overview of the subject of cinematic empathy which relies on a pluralistic approach: it combines theoretical works from film theory and film psychology with empirical research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Among other things it is being proposed to employ the concept of *empathy bias* in order to detect empathy cues and analyze empathy-inducing strategies in a film. The following discussion includes but is not limited to the works of Ed S. Tan, Murray Smith, Carl Plantinga, Amy Coplan, Christine Brinckmann, Martin L. Hoffman, Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B. M. de Waal.

Chapters three and four introduce the reader to the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and its TV adaptation, discussing its themes, style, production, and the overall approach to storytelling.

Chapters five and six present an analysis of empathy-inducing strategies in the series. The material consists of recurring and dominant techniques intended to evoke empathy in the viewer. For the purpose of a clear structure they are divided into narrational and cinematic strategies. The former considers the substance and structure of the plot, including contextual meaning, character writing, and the mode of the first-person narration. The latter concerns the visual form and style of the adaptation: the cinematography, editing, framing, acting, lighting, directing, and the music score. Due to heterogeneity of the film language some of these examples may overlap across the categories, in which case this fact will be appropriately addressed.

The approach to the present study is compatible with the method of film analysis as proposed by Jens Eder. According to him, the author can build hypotheses about the reactions of the viewer and the filmmaker's intentions based on personal affective reactions, while also taking into account affiliated political and socio-cultural influences on the emotional response to the substance of the film.⁵ Moreover, the model of the present analysis is also based on the premise that storytelling techniques of narrative films are predominantly employed with a clear goal of eliciting an intended emotion in the viewer and therefore they can be discussed as a matter of fact.⁶ Correspondingly, the study of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* uses a reasoned argumentation largely based on the personal interpretation of its storytelling techniques and further supported by references to academic studies as well as to personal experiences of the viewers sourced from various media outlets.

Lastly, a remark on the terminology used in the study. On many occasions the following discussion describes qualities of the film as the medium in which case such notions as *film*, *film spectatorship* and *cinematic image* are used in the general sense, not excluding specific formats and genres from its meaning. When the notions have to be separated, the term *film* will be used in a clear opposition to a *TV show*, *serial*, or a *series*. The terms *feature film* and a *movie* are used as synonyms.

⁵ Jens Eder, "Affektlenkung im Film", *Mediale Emotionen. Zur Lenkung von Gefühlen durch Bild und Sound*, hg. v. Oliver Grau/Andreas Keil, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 2005, p. 109.

⁶ Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, New York NY: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 7-8, and Hans J. Wulff, "Affektivität als Element der Filmrezeption oder Im Kino gewesen, geweint (gelacht, gegruselt...) - wie es sich gehört!", *Mit allen Sinnen : Gefühl und Empfindung im Kino*, hg. v. Susanne Marschall/Fabienne Liptay, Marburg: Schüren 2006, S.17.

2. Empathy in the experience of film spectatorship

Film spectatorship is essentially an experience of immersion into another reality, one that is designed by rules of storytelling and manipulated by a scripted series of emotional stimuli. The viewer's journey through a narrative film is usually shaped by a wide spectrum of affective reactions, feelings and emotions varying from interest, amusement and agitation to sympathy and empathy, complete emotional contagion and motor mimicry. Ed Tan calls film a machine that stimulates people's emotions to the degree which normally can't be achieved in real life.⁷ And Arthur Shimamura notes that compared to other forms of entertainment never do we "laugh, cry, and feel fear more often as when we watch movies."⁸ Besides, the impact of cinematic emotions also persists after the closing credits and beyond the silver screen: movie and TV audiences build strong parasocial relationships with media personalities, reproduce characters' outfits, and collect film merchandise to substantiate a sense of belonging to the captivating universe of made-up stories. Movies and television series produce cross-generational cultural tropes, excite heated discussions and undergo scrutiny from the audience. The viewer's investment in mediated narratives is so profound that a disappointing episode of their favorite TV show may ensue a petition signed by 1.8 million people who demand a remake of the whole season, even a year since the show's ending.⁹

The fact that we so deeply engage in fictions — things we know aren't real — is one of the most fascinating attributes of cinematic storytelling. It hinges on the universal human devotion to stories with their potential to cue imagination and provide strong and authentic sensory-affective experiences. Of all the storytelling arts, the film medium has the most available devices to provide these, and precisely how it evokes emotions and feelings is one of the principal subjects of interest in film theory and analysis.

Many film theorists, among others Murray Smith, postulate that the viewer's emotional response to films is rooted in the engagement with fictional characters.¹⁰ In support of this assertion speaks the fact that most of the movie-driven emotions are other-oriented: at least

⁷ Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film. Film as an Emotion Machine*, trans. by Barbara Fasting, Mahwah New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 1996, p. 52.

⁸ Arthur P. Shimamura (ed.), *Psychocinematics. Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, New York NY: Oxford University Press 2013, p. vii.

⁹ Dylan D., "Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with competent writers", Petition created in April 2019, www.change.org/p/hbo-remake-game-of-thrones-season-8-with-competent-writers, 4.04.2020.

¹⁰ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press 1995, p. 1.

conventional narrative films are centered around a protagonist or several characters who undergo a series of challenges, revelations, failures and victories. Our affective reactions during the act of watching naturally depend on the desires and actions of the characters as well as the situations they encounter. Provided that films fulfill certain conditions in establishing our involvement with the characters, we can enter into a state of emotional congruence with them and immerse into an imaginary universe through their perspective. This ability to share emotions of others is a basic social skill known as empathy that works even when we are taken beyond the line of objective reality into the realms of fantasy and fiction.

Cinematic empathy stands out among other affective processes due to its capacity to sway the subjectivity of the spectator. And while not all films require an empathic experience to be enjoyed — for we can easily take pleasure in a light comedy with superficial depiction of characters and an unattached view on their lives — a well-told story that absorbs us fully into its dramatic landscape will create a different, profoundly cathartic and enlightening experience.

Like emotions in general, empathy is a difficult concept to study and analyze because human emotions are not only subjective and complex but also variable, elusive, and correlative to many factors. Nevertheless, the attempt to describe and explain how the film language speaks to the audience must be made in order to understand why cinematic narratives affect us. In the present study we will explore this question by analyzing specific storytelling strategies and so come to unravel the affective power of one of the most important television series of recent years.

2.1 Study of empathy

The concept of empathy plays a significant role in the study of cinema because ever since its conception, empathy has been believed to be an essential aspect of the relationship that people have with art. According to Tan, the term *empathy* came from the German word *Einfühlung* which is usually translated in English as *feeling into*.¹¹ In the late 19th century the notion was used in the domain of philosophy and aesthetics to explain why spectators become affected by works of art such as paintings and sculptures and believe to feel in congruence with them.

¹¹ Ed S. Tan, “The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading”, *Psychocinematics. Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, ed. by Arthur P. Shimamura, New York NY: Oxford University Press 2013, p. 338.

“One was said to feel the pressure of gravity in the tension in one’s own muscles while gazing upon the bulge in the columns supporting the roof of a temple. In such cases, empathy could not involve sharing feelings, since the columns felt nothing,”¹² writes Noël Carroll. Hence it was presumed that observers rather feel into an artwork, i.e. project own emotions into an object on display, meaning that what we unconsciously ascribe to be emotions of the object are in reality our own emotions that are reflecting back to us.

In 1909 the notion of “feeling into” entered the field of psychology where it was translated as *empathy*¹³ (from Greek *empathia* (*em-* ‘in’ + *pathos* ‘feeling’). Subsequently, Tan notes, the concept “lost its association with projection and then disappeared from view [...] having been replaced by the Freudian notion of “identification” and the cognitive one of “perspective taking.”¹⁴ By the end of the 1960s, Tan says, empathy resurfaced “in line with its stem of *pathos*, referring to an affect or emotion”.¹⁵

In regard to the experience of film spectatorship, the phenomenon of sharing characters’ emotion was recognized as early as 1916 by Hugo Münsterberg. In the work “The Photoplay. A Psychological Study” he described the affective impact of the medium film which “obeys the laws of the mind rather than those of the outer world.”¹⁶ As a psychologist, Münsterberg realized the power of close-ups, temporal shifts, and transitions to match the ways of the human thought and imagination, and asserted that certain techniques in focus settings, camera movement and editing allow us to see what other arts couldn’t show — the subjective perspectives of others, their memories, dreams and feelings. The visual perception of expressive mental states on screen led him to conclude that cinema is able to immerse the audience in its emotional landscape and compel viewers to share and imitate the feelings of the characters. Although Münsterberg never used the term *empathy* — rather *sympathy* and *projection* — the substance in his observations coincides with the contemporary theories of cinematic empathy.

Eventually, Jane Stadler tells in a historical overview, empathy became a subject of interest “in relation to spectatorship, emotion, and embodied responses, primarily in the sub-fields of

¹² Noël Carroll, “Empathy and painting”, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. by Heidi L. Maibom, New York: Routledge 2017, p. 285.

¹³ Tan, “The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading”, p. 338.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A psychological Study*, New York & London: D. Appleton and Company 1916, p. 94.

cinematic ethics, cognitive narratology, and phenomenological analysis.”¹⁷ One of the earliest theoretical developments was made in 1920s by Béla Balázs who suggested that close-up shots of the human face not only convey “feelings, emotions, moods, intentions and thoughts”¹⁸ of a character but also make them vicariously tangible for the spectator. He further noted that sound, cinematography and other aspects of film narration are able to illuminate the inner life of fictional characters and thus “break down the opposition between self and the other.”¹⁹

During decades after that, cinematic empathy had been an object of a rather sporadic theoretical interest while remaining dependent on the larger field of study of film emotions — a subject which, scholars note, is still studied relatively little,²⁰ without much specificity,²¹ and almost never through empirical research.²²

Carl Plantinga and Murray Smith explain that a lack of systematic knowledge of film emotions and in particular empathy is the result of the long-standing film theory tradition of focusing on representation, ideology, and psychoanalytical concepts of pleasure and desire, which only “lead theorists’ attention away from the emotions.”²³ Emotions in general have tended to be avoided as a “potentially messy concept”.²⁴ Neither were they considered relevant because of the long dominating behaviorist perspective which denied the role of mental processes, feelings, and conditioning. But since the cognitive revolution of 1960-1970s,²⁵ the advancement of digital technologies and neurophysiological research revealed that the mind and the brain, bodily states and the thought process are connected.²⁶ This gave art theorists a new vocabulary to discuss the “beholder’s share”²⁷ of an aesthetic experience, that is, how our mentality, knowledge, expectations, and emotions shape our perception of art.

¹⁷ Jane Stadler, “Empathy in film”, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. by Heidi L. Maibom, New York: Routledge 2017, p. 317.

¹⁸ Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, London: Dennis Dobson 1952, p. 61.

¹⁹ Stadler, “Empathy in film”, p. 318.

²⁰ Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, New York NY: Cambridge University Press 2003, p.3

²¹ Carl Plantinga, Greg M. Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, p. 1.

²² Arthur P. Shimamura (ed.), “Psychocinematics: Issues and Directions”, *Psychocinematics. Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, New York NY: Oxford University Press 2013, p. 2.

²³ Plantinga, Smith, “Passionate Views. *Film, Cognition, and Emotion*”, pp. 12-13.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁵ Shimamura, “Psychocinematics Issues and Directions”, p. 12.

²⁶ Plantinga, Smith, *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, p. 2.

²⁷ Author refers to the term by Ernst Gombrich: Shimamura, “Psychocinematics Issues and Directions”, p. 12.

According to Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham,²⁸ a notable shift in the study of emotion in film and media happened in the 1990s when Noël Carroll published a book on the viewer's emotional responses to horror films.²⁹ Afterwards the subject of empathy was comparatively widely embraced by cognitivist theorists who studied mental and physical activity of film viewers, among them is Murray Smith,³⁰ Torben Grodal,³¹ and Carl Plantinga.³² As many other works followed, empathy was linked to a variety of psychological phenomena. At the same time, Stadler says, the definition of empathy and use of the terms associated with it have never been agreed on.³³ As a result, much of the literature on the subject of cinematic empathy has been and is still dedicated solely or mostly to clarification of concepts and discussion of terminology.

Because empathy falls within a broad spectrum of a cross-disciplinary research, there are many perspectives from which the subject can be approached. Due to the discoveries in social sciences and neuroscience, empathy was proved to be a crucial component of social interaction intrinsic not only to humans but also to some animals.³⁴ Across various disciplines scholars find touch points in the workings of the phenomenon of empathy, and all of them combined contribute to a fuller understanding of empathetic processes. Therefore, dealing with this subject, at least in regard to film theory, calls almost inevitably for a pluralistic approach. In fact, the most comprehensive analyses of cinematic empathy such as those featured in the collection of essays "Psychocinematics. Exploring cognition at the movies"³⁵ and "Passionate views. Film, cognition, and emotion"³⁶ draw on the findings and ideas from neuroscience, psychology, ethology, anthropology as well as philosophy and narrative theory. Therefore, the scope of the further study will also include the relevant scientific data that contributes to the analysis of the role and nature of empathy in the experience of film spectatorship.

²⁸ Ted Nannicelli, Paul Taberham (eds.), *Cognitive media theory*, New York/London: Routledge 2014, p. 2.

²⁹ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York: Routledge 1990.

³⁰ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995.

³¹ Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film*, New York: Oxford University Press 2009.

³² Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2009.

³³ Stadler, "Empathy in film", p. 319.

³⁴ Stephanie D. Preston, Frans B. M. de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Issue 25, 2002, pp. 1–72.

³⁵ Shimamura (ed.), *Psychocinematics. Exploring Cognition at the Movies*.

³⁶ Plantinga, Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*.

2.2 Definition and limits of empathy

Various studies of human brain activity have shown that observing another person's affective state "activates brain networks also involved in the firsthand experience of these states",³⁷ according to neuroscientists Boris C. Bernhardt and Tanja Singer. In "The Neural Basis of Empathy" they present a comprehensive set of evidence proving our propensity to vicariously experience feelings of others. Furthermore, they indicate that controlled experiments in brain imaging are necessary not only for understanding the phenomenon of empathy but also for developing a universal definition of it.³⁸ Noting that empathy may be interpreted differently depending on a context or a discipline, they propose to define it generally as the ability to share the affective states of others, i.e. feelings, moods, and emotions.³⁹

Speaking specifically about the subject of film, a compatible use of the term is employed by Christine Brinckmann. In "The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study" she understands the empathic process as "the ability to experience or sense another's feelings [...] and to understand his or her state of mind, albeit usually in a weaker form and mixed with feelings of one's own."⁴⁰

In the practical part of this study, we will use Brinckmann's definition when describing empathy with film characters, because it agrees with the common use of the term and also recognizes the simultaneous occurrence of individual emotions. For many scholars, this is what makes a distinction between *empathy* and *emotional contagion*, which will be discussed in more detail further.

Because of the complex nature of empathy, it has been a subject of numerous interpretations among film theorists. In some views, different but similar phenomena sometimes merge into one, often blurring the line between empathy and other emotions. One of the main discrepancies arise from disagreement over the question whether empathy is an affective or cognitive process. Many scholars, among whom are Jens Eder⁴¹ and Amy Coplan,⁴² maintain

³⁷ Boris C. Bernhardt, Tania Singer, "The Neural Basis of Empathy", *The Annual Review of Neuroscience*, Issue 35, 2012, p. 2.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Christine Brinckmann, "The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study", *Color and Empathy. Essays on Two Aspects of Film*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2014, p. 175.

⁴¹ Eder, "Affektlenkung im Film", p. 113.

⁴² Amy Coplan, "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Special Issue: Art, Mind, and Cognitive Science, Spring 2004, p. 143, www.jstor.org/stable/1559198.

that empathy is a combined, cognitive-affective process. According to them, the act of feeling an emotion (affective process) is enabled when the spectator embraces the character's perspective in film, taking up his or her perception of reality that is a part of their persona (cognitive process). Accordingly, the viewer has to understand something about the other in order to share his or her emotions.

A different opinion, for instance, is given by Tan, who understands empathy as a purely cognitive process that requires the viewer to only understand and evaluate the feelings and situational meaning of the character.⁴³ Accordingly, he doesn't use the term to describe the actual process of feeling an emotion, as opposed to the findings of Bernhardt and Singer, and interpretation of Brinckmann. For Tan, the process of feeling a corresponding emotion is referred to as *empathic emotion* — a broad category that includes a combination of emotions such as sympathy, compassion, admiration and others depending on the dramatic unfolding of the film.⁴⁴ Plantinga also considers *empathy* in a broader sense, incorporating *sympathy* into its definition.⁴⁵

Most of the film scholars, however, tend to recognize sympathy as an emotion separate from empathy, although they both can occur at the same time. Jens Eder, Berys Gaut, Amy Coplan, Murray Smith and others who define *empathy* as feeling *with* the characters, indicate that *sympathy* is, on the opposite, the state of feeling *for* them. Smith formulated the difference in the following way: empathy is a process of “central imagining”⁴⁶ which refers to the viewer's sharing of the perspective of the character, whereas sympathy is “acentral”,⁴⁷ which means that the viewer maintains the outside position and experiences emotions not identical with those of the character. A useful example illustrating the difference between the two phenomena is given by Gaut: “You can pity the character if the character doesn't pity himself. You can worry for the character if he is unaware of the danger... You can sympathize with the character who is in a coma and not feeling anything, but you can't empathize with them at this moment.”⁴⁸ Both sympathy and empathy exist in a close connection to each other, and,

⁴³ Tan, “The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading”, p. 172.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴⁵ Carl Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film”, *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga/Greg M. Smith, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, pp. 239-249.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴⁸ Berys Gaut, “Identification and Emotion”, *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga/Greg M. Smith, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, p. 207.

according to Gaut, reinforce each other.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is much more sensible to consider *empathy* as a separate phenomena, albeit keeping in mind its relation to similar character-related emotional responses.

Another phenomenon worth mentioning is *emotional contagion*, defined by Bernhardt and Singer as “a tendency to automatically adopt the emotional state of another person.”⁵⁰ According to Coplan, contagion is very similar to empathy in that it requires sharing of the same affective states. However, unlike empathy, it lacks the cognitive component, self-other differentiation and perspective-taking, and is not an imaginative process.⁵¹ In other words, whereas in the process of empathy we maintain the appraisal of the situation or emotion at display, in the moment of contagion, we are believed to adopt and undergo the emotion on a pre-conscious level.

Coplan notes that this interpretation is applied strictly to the subject of character engagement in the experience of film spectatorship and may oppose interpretations in other fields. In psychoanalytical theory, for instance, emotional contagion may be used as a synonym to *identification*.⁵² In neurological research, as asserted by Preston & de Waal, empathy is known to always involve “some level of emotional contagion and personal distress.”⁵³

Dealing with the subject from the perspective of cognitive psychology, Coplan demonstrates how films can force us mirror the emotions of the characters on a purely affective level. She proposes that contagion is an automatic, involuntary reaction typically elicited by extreme close-ups, shallow focus, various point-of-view structures, and progressively closer shots of a character’s face and expression given they all are of longer duration than average shots.⁵⁴ A significant distinction in this case lies in the fact that during such shots the viewer may feel a strong and congruent emotional response even without knowing much about the characters or having enough information to evaluate them. As an example, she cites the opening of the Omaha Beach sequence in the movie *Saving Private Ryan* (1998):

⁴⁹ Berys Gaut, “Identification and Emotion”, p. 211.

⁵⁰ Bernhardt, Singer, “The Neural Basis of Empathy”, p. 3.

⁵¹ Coplan, “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions”, p. 145.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵³ Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Amy Coplan, “Catching Characters’ Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film”, *Film Studies*, Issue 8, Summer 2006, p. 29.

“There are no cutaway shots showing us what the characters see, and there is almost no dialogue to tell us about the characters’ identities, relationships, thoughts, or feelings. In spite of our lack of information, we have an immediate emotional response to what we perceive. While the soldiers are still in the boats, we are presented with eight close-ups in a row of different soldiers’ faces. Some of the characters express fear, some anticipation, some anxiety, and others depressed resignation. While watching them, most spectators end up experiencing the same sorts of feelings that the characters are experiencing.”⁵⁵

Consequently, the viewer can undergo a range of affective, mimetic, and cognitive reactions, all at the same time, whereas some of that processes could be ascribed to the process of empathy. As Coplan asserts, “empathy and emotional contagion are closely related processes, and during an episode of engagement, it is often difficult to determine where one emotional process ends and another one begins.”⁵⁶ In fact, she says further, it is likely impossible to experience only contagion without other, related emotions, especially “without some kind of empathy or sympathy”.⁵⁷ This is an important takeaway from the discussion, because Coplan’s arguments acknowledge heterogeneity of character-related emotions while still drawing a line between separate processes.

It is also the assertion of Brinckmann that an analysis of film emotions and empathy in particular should embrace the concurrence of various feelings rather than combine them into one broad category: “One emotional state does not rule out the other; on the contrary, a mixture of different reactions, which can be very ambiguous and unstable, is the rule.”⁵⁸ Therefore, empathy, sympathy, admiration, compassion, emotional contagion and other emotional reactions may all be at play at the same time or at different moments, running in parallel or overlapping, enforcing each other or completely independent. Still, these phenomena can and should be regarded as separate ones.

Altogether, these takes on the notion of empathy and related processes open up a way to incorporate a wide perspective for a practical analysis, where we take into account pluralistic nature of film emotions and relation of empathy to other relevant processes. The accepted definition of empathy also allows for the transference of our real-life experiences to those related to film fictions. After all, empathy is familiar to most people — sharing emotions of others is a natural part of our daily lives and interactions with media and art. However, in case of the latter, our relationship with persons on screen is staged in a fictional universe and is

⁵⁵ Coplan, “Catching Characters’ Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film”, p. 26.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Brinckmann, “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study”, p. 176.

manipulated by an apparatus which intends a certain kind of the viewer's involvement, steers deliberate emotional responses, and controls the viewer's gaze. Yet neither the illusory essence of the film medium nor the artificial nature of characters and stories disturbs the authenticity of our emotional experiences. Reflecting on this paradox, Dolf Zillmann mentions that the fact remains baffling for many scholars and raises many questions:

“Why is it that people exposed to drama lose or, at any rate, abandon their cognizance of the artificiality of the situation? Why don't they continue to recognize the contrived, make-belief nature of the setting and respond to it as an interesting retelling or enactment of an actual, liberally modified, or totally imagined occurrence? How can so-called rational beings fall prey to the actors' personas and respond to them as if they were real persons in their immediate environment - either friend or foe?”⁵⁹

In dealing with these aspects of the empathic experience, Zillmann and many others turn to the role of subjectivity, capacity for imagination and identification with others, regardless of whether they are real people or fictions. In the following, we will highlight the main points of this discussion in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of cinematic empathy.

2.3 Role of subjectivity and identification in viewer's relationship with film characters

In an experimental study⁶⁰ conducted in 1944 by Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, participants were shown a simple trick film in which three geometrical shapes moved across the screen — together and alone, in various directions, slow and fast. Respondents had to describe and interpret the scenes. The majority of them reported to have perceived the movements of objects as those of animate beings, “in most cases of persons; in two cases of birds.”⁶¹ Many wrote down elaborate stories connecting the short simple episodes into the following plots: two men were fighting for a girl, chasing each other, hiding in the house, leaning on the wall in a weakened condition, and even feeling rage and frustration,⁶² thus fully

⁵⁹ Dolf Zillmann, “Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama”, *Poetics*, Vol. 23, Issues 1-2, January 1995, pp. 33-34, [doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X\(94\)00020-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(94)00020-7).

⁶⁰ Fritz Heider, Marianne Simmel, “An experimental study of apparent behavior”, *The American Journal of Psychology*, Issue 57, 1944, pp. 243-259, www.jstor.org/stable/1416950.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 246.

⁶² Heider, Simmel, “An experimental study of apparent behavior”, p. 247.

anthropomorphizing the moving circles and triangles, attributing to them emotional states, actions, and motivations.

This example is one of the most illustrative evidences of how images, especially moving ones, cue the viewer's imagination and emotion by invoking schemas in our consciousness. *Schema*, according to Keith Oatley, is a "a mental structure of knowledge and understanding of some aspect of how the world works. It's a component of the mental model we each make of our world, a model that we update continuously."⁶³ Oatley explains that in the aforementioned experiment, the patterns of the objects' movement prompted the viewers' mental schemas of concepts and events familiar from the immediate reality. This way, he says, visual cues in a film invoke schemas through which we project our real-life experiences onto the screen and so we come to apprehend fictional events in the same way as if we were inside the fictional story.⁶⁴

The ability to project our schemas onto external objects is often linked to the ingrained phenomenon of mimicry or imitation, and work of mirror neurons.⁶⁵ Because of that we are naturally inclined to attribute qualities of the real world and ourselves to fiction, and, as Tan notes, can feel with others even regardless of their artificial nature: provided we see some likeness with human behavior, we can empathize with geometrical shapes, fictional animals, puppets, or other lifeless objects.⁶⁶ Therefore, it is not only possible but also natural that we respond to fictional characters with an authentic emotion. However, the exact mechanism of the way we come to empathize in the act of film spectatorship remains a disputed subject.

Oatley argues that the reason we, the audience, do that lies in the mode of *simulation* and *identification* in which we imaginatively insert ourselves in the film's diegetic dimension.⁶⁷

He describes this as a twofold process:

⁶³ Keith Oatley, "How Cues on Screen Prompt Emotions in the Mind", *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga/Greg M. Smith, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, p. 269.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 272.

⁶⁵ Marco Iacoboni, "Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons", *The Annual Review of Psychology*, Issue 60, 2009, p. 654, doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163604.

⁶⁶ Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading", p. 340.

⁶⁷ Oatley, "How Cues on Screen Prompt Emotions in the Mind", p. 275.

“One part is that, by observation of the other’s behavior or by imagination, we infer by simulation within ourselves what emotions (and desires and thoughts) the other person is having and impute them to him or her. The second part, which occurs at the same time, is that we experience corresponding emotions in our self.”⁶⁸

In this view, the act of film spectatorship can be described as an intersection of identities and perspectives: On the one hand, we are forced to identify with the characters (most often with the protagonist) which makes us embrace their point of view, put aside our own goals and plans, and wish for the fulfillment of his or her goals.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Oatley continues, “questions of the emotions of characters in the story become secondary; the primary focus becomes the emotions of audience members as they imagine themselves into the characters’ predicaments.”⁷⁰ Because one is believed to undergo a certain shift in subjectivity upon the interaction with the other, to some extent, the act of film spectatorship resembles a communicative act of a parasocial kind. Adriano D’aloia characterizes this encounter as an intimate “quasi-intersubjective relationship”⁷¹ of two bodies that are “involved in a physical, mental and emotional experience, while mediated by a third quasi-body: the film.”⁷²

Taking into account the mediated nature and affectivity of film encounters, most theorists tend to look for explanation of cinematic empathy in terms of the medium’s power to force identification and perspective-taking. And although these concepts are intrinsic to the theoretical discussion of empathy, there is still little consensus about the subject.⁷³ Some of the debates in this context revolve around the following questions: How does one navigate the ambiguity of the term *identification*? What role does identification play in the process of empathy? Do the concepts of identification and perspective-taking equal empathy? Hereafter, we will highlight the most important points of these discussions.

Drawing on several significant studies of the subject, we can speak of two kinds of identification in film that were proposed by Christian Metz. The primary identification — with the camera — denotes that the viewer’s gaze is subservient to the authority of the camera, hence ultimately its view becomes our own.⁷⁴ Accordingly, in the act of film

⁶⁸ Oatley, “How Cues on Screen Prompt Emotions in the Mind”, p. 276.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 275.

⁷¹ Adriano D’Aloia, “Cinematic Empathy: Spectator Involvement in the Film Experience”, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Dee Reynolds/Matthew Reason, Bristol: Intellect 2012, p. 187.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Coplan, “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions”, p. 147.

⁷⁴ Christian Metz, *The imaginary signifier: Psychoanalysis and the cinema*, trans. by Celia Britton et al., Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1982, pp. 52-53.

spectatorship, the viewer's vision is thought to be totally aligned with the apparatus that creates the image: "The film is what I receive it is also what I release... Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; In both these figures together, I am the camera, pointed yet recording."⁷⁵ This way, Metz explains why we are not disturbed by the various camera movements such as panning (while we ourselves do not turn our heads) or first-person perspective, during which we acquire the vision of a fictional character: because we accept the vision on the screen as our own.

The secondary identification is that with actors and personas embodied by them.⁷⁶ Zillmann observes that through this kind of emotional engagement the viewer is believed to be fulfilling an unconscious desire to imagine themselves in the place of others and thereby "seek access to the gratifications denied them in their own lives."⁷⁷

The aforementioned varieties of *identification* derive from the psychoanalytic theory, and many film scholars aside from Metz adopted this Freudian conception of the term. However, Zillmann points out that it is not always clear what meaning is attached to the notion by different authors because even in psychoanalysis *identification* can describe different processes.⁷⁸ Most basic definition denotes the process of perceiving an external object as a part of own self⁷⁹ or adopting qualities of another person into one's personality.⁸⁰ Zillmann observes, however, that the original concept and later versions differ at least in the sequence of events entrenched in the process of identification, accordingly it may either be believed that we tend to identify with people because they are similar to us, or that we come to perceive someone as similar because of the identification process.⁸¹ Zillmann notes that as early as 1940, *identification* already "was interpreted in more ways than any other psychoanalytical term."⁸² Subsequently, he says, Non-Freudians "added their own definitions, prompting Sanford (1955) to declare the concept too polysemic to be useful."⁸³

⁷⁵ Metz, *The imaginary signifier: Psychoanalysis and the cinema*, p. 53.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 49-50

⁷⁷ Zillmann, "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama", p. 35.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁹ Jerome Kagan, "The Concept of Identification", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 5, 1958, p. 297.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 298.

⁸¹ Zillmann, "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama", p. 34.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 35.

Likewise, Noël Carroll argued against the usage of the identification concept,⁸⁴ not only because of the underlying ambiguities but also because of the tendency to ascribe to it a state in which the spectator fully merges with the fictional character and feels identical to him or her.⁸⁵ His argument is based on the premise that identification is equivalent to perspective-taking, i.e. the viewer immerses in the perspective of the fictional character and experiences the fictional events from the character's point of view. Accordingly, Carroll denied such possibility at all, saying that the emotions resulting from observing film characters and the emotions of the characters are not compatible by design of storytelling: We are aware of the fictional nature of the film and know that the illusory events are not happening to us, therefore we see them from only our outside perspective.⁸⁶ Specifically, he says,

“We respond to fiction from outside. Our point of view is that of an observer of a situation and not ... that of the participant of the situation. When a character is about to be ambushed, we feel fear for her, we do not imagine ourselves to be her and then experience ‘her’ fear.”⁸⁷

He illustrated the hypothesis by citing, among other three examples, the opening scene in *Jaws*, in which a girl is swimming happily in the sea while unbeknown to her there is a shark circling around. The viewers, he says, feel suspense and fear, but the girl is relaxed and unaware.⁸⁸ Carroll argued that since we possess more information than the character, we feel differently and hence can not engage in perspective-taking, identification and, therefore, empathy.⁸⁹ In short, he claims that we are prone to sympathy and other character-related emotions in the process of feeling for them rather than with them, because by default we always know more than characters do.

On the one hand, this is a valid point that rightfully challenges an idea that identification means losing oneself in the perspective of the other. On the other hand, Carroll creates a generalization through one example while dismissing the existence of films with other modes of narration, in which the first-person perspective is consciously used to give the viewer a deep access to the inner life of the character. Therefore, the assumption that the lack of

⁸⁴ Carroll, “The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart”, p. 90.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸⁶ Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, pp. 311-313.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 311-312.

⁸⁸ Carroll, “The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart”, p. 90.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

empathy or perspective-taking or identification in one scene in several specific films should put an end to the concepts entirely is rather short-sighted.

Responding to Carroll's argumentation, Tan proposes that identification doesn't mean fully merging with fictional characters: "Total identification, in a literal sense, would end in delusion."⁹⁰ According to him, we maintain the self-other differentiation even when experiencing events from the perspective of fictional characters.

Apparently because empathy is dependent on the cognitive approximation with the other and because the film medium is able to literally present the inner perspective and point of view of the characters, it became an established practice to equal the process of sharing the perspective with the process of empathy development, and similarly, in some interpretations, identification can equal both empathy and perspective-taking.

From other points of view, like that of Coplan, perspective-taking is one of the prerequisites for development of empathy.⁹¹ Whereas she uses the term *identification* in reference to emotional contagion so as to show the lack of self-other differentiation in the process: "In its simplest form, there is total identification without discrimination between one's own feelings and those of the other."⁹²

As one of the latest voices speaking about the terminology problem, Berys Gaut suggests to adopt a pluralistic perspective, proposing that identification and empathy can take many forms. He suggests to distinguish between an *empathic identification*⁹³ (which means feeling "genuine emotions toward imagined or fictional situations")⁹⁴ as opposed to *affective identification* ("to imagine feeling what she feels")⁹⁵ and *imaginative identification* ("Here one means that one *imagines* oneself in that person's situation" or putting ourselves in someone else's shoes).⁹⁶

Preston & de Waal remark that there are many distinctions attempted to be made in the debates of processes of empathy and identification, which though "are empirically based and help to categorize behavior but they have been overemphasized to the point of distraction."⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film. Film as an Emotion Machine*, p. 190.

⁹¹ Coplan, "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions", p. 144.

⁹² *ibid.*, p.145 — quoting Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*, Harvard University Press 1996, p. 80.

⁹³ Berys Gaut, "Empathy and Identification in Cinema", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Issue 34, 2010, p. 138.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 137

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", p. 2.

Especially the case with the distinction made by Gaut quite confirms the statement of Preston & de Waal who say that definitions like “putting oneself in the place of another” or “imaginatively projecting oneself into the situation of another” [...] are abstract and elusive, and indicate an insufficient understanding of the way the nervous system instantiates empathy.”⁹⁸

Although the exact mechanism of empathy is not yet fully understood even in neurological research, there are many models and assumptions based on empirical studies that describe empathy often without the terms identification and perspective-taking.⁹⁹ The seminal article of Preston & de Waal introduced a Perception-Action Model that explains empathy in terms of mimicry or simulation¹⁰⁰ and describes how the experience of empathy may vary across subjects with different experiences through the mechanism of empathy bias — the subject that we will discuss later in more detail.

Nevertheless, as discussions continue, Preston & de Waal propose to look at the study of empathy from a wide angle, one that “incorporates and validates all of these perspectives, working across all levels of analysis to determine how to mesh the perspectives into a unified model.”¹⁰¹

The same approach seems also appropriate for this study — rather than accepting or rejecting one of many diverse opinions on the role and definition of identification and perspective-taking in the process of empathizing, we will keep in mind all the discussed viewpoints and concentrate on how the subject of this study intends to evoke empathy, and what mechanisms trigger that effect. Although *identification* is a problematic term, we can’t dismiss it whatsoever, not least because it is used by average film viewers in the English-speaking world. According to Turner Graeme, audiences speak about identifying with characters when they sense being alike with them, “seeing ourselves in the characters”.¹⁰² Therefore, in the further analysis of the series, we will keep in mind the possible distinctions and observe how they are manifested in the object of this study.

⁹⁸ Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 2.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 1–72.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

¹⁰¹ Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 49.

¹⁰² Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, London, New York: Routledge 1999, p. 132.

2.4 Requirements for cinematic empathy

As we have gathered from previous discussions, empathy requires an interaction between the subject (one who feels empathy) and the object (one whose feelings are shared), regardless of whether the object is a real entity or a fictional character. And although empathy with the latter abides mostly by the same psychological laws that govern our real-life experiences, films need to establish a specific framework for it to emerge. In fact, Brinckmann claims that cinematic fictions have even more potential to evoke empathy,¹⁰³ because they not only manipulate the presentation of reality but also, in Münsterberg's words, are able to bring the hidden, innermost, and subjective mental states to a highly affective expression. Here, we will outline the general prerequisites for cinematic empathy while the more elaborate overview of empathy-inducing strategies will be presented in the following subsection.

In general, cinematic empathy is likely to occur “when audience members perceive, imagine, or hear about a film character's affective and mental state and, in so doing, vicariously experience a shared or congruent state,”¹⁰⁴ asserts Jane Stadler. Speaking more specifically, Brinckmann recounts that empathy can be triggered by “facial expression and body language, by voice and wording, or by an observed situation, presuming we understand or can imagine what is happening.”¹⁰⁵ In the moment of perceiving an emotion of the object, it is also important to understand the significance of the event for the character,¹⁰⁶ says Tan. The latter is a fundamental requirement, because, as a cognitive-affective process, empathy emanates from appraisal, which is where it differs from emotional contagion. Therefore, for the analysis of cinematic empathy it is important to take into account how the film structures and conveys its meaning and ideas.

In accordance with this, Plantinga asserts that the primary task of the film is to lay the proper foundation for empathy through the narrative.¹⁰⁷ Precisely the writing, narrative structure, and the narrative context prompt and guide the development of perceptual, cognitive and affective operations on the part of the viewer. Among them is categorization (who is the protagonist and antagonist of the story?), apprehension (what is the plot of the film, the main conflict,

¹⁰³ Brinckmann, “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study”, p. 176.

¹⁰⁴ Stadler, “Empathy in Film”, p. 317.

¹⁰⁵ Brinckmann, “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study”, p. 175.

¹⁰⁶ Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film. Film as an Emotion Machine*, p. 172.

¹⁰⁷ Carl Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film”, *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga/Greg M. Smith, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, p. 251.

motivation, and the goal of the protagonist? What significance do the events have for the protagonist?), moral judgement (does the protagonist adhere to the values and beliefs of the viewer?), and affective disposition (do we like the protagonist?). Subsequently, the latter affects the scale and potential of emotional involvement and empathy with the character.

It is generally believed that indifference toward the main character is most likely to result in loss of focus, distancing and alienation,¹⁰⁸ which hinders the process of character engagement and empathy. In contrast, the positive affective disposition toward the protagonist has been proved¹⁰⁹ to enable congruent emotional reactions, and, according to Zillmann, is absolutely necessary for inviting empathy.¹¹⁰ Whereas the negative attitude toward the protagonist prevents empathic reactions and, Zillmann says, results in the *counterempathic* response.¹¹¹

Referring to the research of the subject, Zillmann explains that in the act of film spectatorship, ideally, we slip into the concurrent mode of affect in which we take pleasure in observing the events favorable for the protagonist and experience negative reaction upon their misfortunes. The opposite reaction occurs in regard to the antagonist. Zillmann notes that just as in real life, “we share [...] the emotions of happy occasions and tragic events with those we consider friends. But our enemies' good fortunes distress us, and their misfortunes give us pleasure.”¹¹² Correspondingly, Zillmann and other scholars speak about the fact that through the positive affective disposition toward the protagonist the audience come to identify with him or her and, as Oatley puts it, also come to share “the trajectory of his or her desires and concerns.”¹¹³ This is important for the analysis of empathy-inducing narrative techniques, because a great part of the character-related emotions occurs in response to the framework of goals and obstacles written into the character's journey, as well as to the conflicts that inevitably arise when the character's pursuit of goals is endangered. According to Smith, “We rejoice when the protagonist achieves a goal or subgoal; we are sad, fearful, or anxious when a goal is frustrated.”¹¹⁴ Consequently, dependent on the structure of goals and obstacles, movies and TV series can use genre-specific conventions or contextual reasons to shape the intended viewer's experience, for example creating suspense when the odds are against the hero's

¹⁰⁸ Brinckmann, “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study”, p. 179.

¹⁰⁹ Zillmann, “Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama”, p. 44.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 41, 46.

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹³ Oatley, “How Cues on Screen Prompt Emotions in the Mind”, p. 275.

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, p. 44.

survival or evoking existential fears in dystopias where the pursuit of freedom and happiness is rendered impossible.

As the narrative context provides clues about the personality of the protagonist and his or her goals, it is also important for development of empathy that the audience understand and align with the hero's motivation, belief system, and character in general. Often this is achieved by giving the audience an access to the inner life of the protagonist. This may be done by conveying the character's subjective perspective through the first-person narration or voiceover in which the narrator explicates the character's thoughts and feelings. The film thus uses the technique of addressing the audience directly and in doing so establishes a trusting and intimate relationship with them, while also giving them access to that which is hidden from the plane of the image. When such mode of narration is used together with cinematic techniques such as a facial close-up or a reaction shot, the audience receives a sufficient amount of information to know exactly what the character is going through, and is likely to not only catch but also vicariously experience the same emotional state. Smith describes the effect of such scenes in the following way:

“By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.”¹¹⁵

Overall, the fundamental requirement for cinematic empathy lies in the extent to which the viewer understands and likes the protagonist. Only when this cognitive-affective predisposition is established can we speak about the successful process in which the spectator comes to respond to empathy cues and share the emotional journey together with the character. What empathy cues are and how they elicit an intended response is the subject of the further discussion.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, p. 95 — quoting Adam Smith, *Theory of moral sentiments*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976, p. 6.

2.5 Elicitors, conditioners, and bias of empathy in film and television storytelling

In order to distinguish and categorize the empathy-inducing strategies inherent to film storytelling, Plantinga proposes the terms *elicitors* and *conditioners*. Although his scope of study is quite limited to one type of scenes that elicit an empathic response, his vocabulary can easily be used to embrace the whole spectrum of empathy-inducing techniques in film.

According to Plantinga, *elicitors* of empathy are narrative, visual or auditory cues that evoke congruent emotion through formal aspects of film. The narrative elicitors of empathy most often are narrative context,¹¹⁶ the interior representation of consciousness and emotional states, and narrative perspective.¹¹⁷ Visual cues for empathy are known to be face-expression and acting, facial close-up, POV shots, reaction shots, long takes,¹¹⁸ slow motion whether achieved by editing or cinematography.¹¹⁹ Also, according to Stadler, hand-held cinematography “has been shown to elicit stronger mirroring responses and an augmented sense of empathic involvement with characters.”¹²⁰ Overall, says Stadler, empathy can be cued by the aesthetic style in general,¹²¹ something that doesn’t require the process of identification. Auditory cues can be found in verbal cues as expressed by the characters or in the music score which evokes or underscores the emotion displayed on the screen.

In contrast to *elicitors*, *conditioners* are factors external to film narration. Plantinga distinguishes two kinds of them: the first are the individual differences of the viewers and the second is the viewing context.¹²² The former refers partly to the role of subjectivity and schemas which one applies according to individual life experience, but also to mental and biological predispositions:

“Some are able to read others’ emotions more accurately and quickly than others...Gender may play a significant role in empathic experience. Some psychological research shows that in Western culture, at least, women are both more expressive of various emotions and surpass males in recognizing and interpreting others’ emotional states based on nonverbal expression. This suggests that females tend to have a superior capacity for empathy in Western culture.”¹²³

¹¹⁶ Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film”, p. 251

¹¹⁷ Suzanne Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy”, *Narrative*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Ohio State University Press, October 2006, pp. 213, www.jstor.org/stable/20107388.

¹¹⁸ Stadler, “Empathy in film”, p. 324.

¹¹⁹ Coplan, “Catching Characters’ Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film”, p. 29.

¹²⁰ Stadler, “Empathy in film”, p. 324.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 317.

¹²² Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film”, p. 248.

¹²³ *ibid.*

Consequently, gender, cultural background, and other attributes shaping one's mentality, psychology and physiology influence the capacity and the extent of the empathic response. The fact of personal differences among the viewing audience, of course, influences the reception of a film. Accordingly, if a big and expensive production is aimed at a broad audience, it makes sure to provide various recurring emotional cues in the film so that if some of them fail to elicit an intended reaction, there are still enough others to reach other viewers and so entertain the most possible number of them.¹²⁴

The viewing context as another factor that conditions the affective response is mostly a matter that Plantinga points out in terms of the experience of watching a movie in the cinema. He observes that the ongoing reactions of the people nearby enable mutual emotional contagion and reinforce the emotional intensity of everyone in the room.¹²⁵

To that we certainly can add the aspects pertained to the present-day practices of engaging with media content through television, VoD platforms and online streaming services. The mode of consumption is now heavily influenced by the availability of options that permit people to binge-watch several episodes, seasons or complete TV shows without or with minimal breaks, which creates a remarkable sense of continuity and degree of involvement. Moreover, online platforms and some networks television channels offer screenings with no commercials during the programs. Also language plays a significant role in the perception of films. A translation may not only distort the original meaning of a dialogue line, but also the dubbing voice may rob a cinematic moment of an intended emotion. And if viewers concentrate on the subtitles, they may lose a visual cue for emotion. Therefore, these aspects also should be considered as empathy conditioners.

Plantinga is likely to be the only scholar who has proposed a practical analysis of specific film techniques that result in empathy. More importantly, in his article "Scene of Empathy"¹²⁶ he comes close to outlining a methodology that can help film theorists and critics locate and explain certain cues in film that evoke an empathic response from the spectator. He suggests that the ways in which a film achieves that is by a long duration of scenes or takes,¹²⁷ by encouraging allegiance with the character¹²⁸ and by drawing attention to character's facial

¹²⁴ Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, p. 43.

¹²⁵ Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film", p. 248.

¹²⁶ Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film".

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 250.

expression.¹²⁹ Together with the terms elicitors and conditioners we, therefore, have very useful concepts for describing the actual means and effects of the film language that result in emotional responses of the spectator.

However, Plantinga's work concentrates on a narrow subject matter of a certain types of scenes, which does not cover further instances of cinematic empathy. Because a fuller understanding is essential for answering to the main research question of this paper, we propose to turn to the empirical research and the concept of empathy bias. In doing so, we find a method of detecting a wide spectrum of empathy cues in film and explain why they prompt us to feel congruently with film characters.

Empathy bias is a term used by psychologist Martin L. Hoffman and Preston & de Waal to denote an inclination or predisposition for empathy. Combining their classifications, we find that empathy is biased in the following six ways:

- 1) Similarity. "We are more empathic to people similar to ourselves".¹³⁰
- 2) Familiarity. "We are more empathic to people who are familiar to ourselves".¹³¹
- 3) Past experience. We are more empathic to other people's situations of distress and others if we have previously already experienced it.¹³²
- 4) Learning. Empathy increases with "explicit or implicit teaching"¹³³ or conditioning.¹³⁴
- 5) Salience. Empathy increases with "the strength of the stimulus, e.g. the louder, the closer, or the more realistic the object is presented".¹³⁵
- 6) Proximity. "We are more empathic to people who are present — even though people who are unfamiliar, different, or located elsewhere may be equally (or more) affected by our actions."¹³⁶

¹²⁹ Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film", pp. 249, 254.

¹³⁰ Martin L. Hoffman, "Empathy and Moral Development", *The Annual Report of Educational Psychology in Japan*, Vol. 35, 1996, p. 159 and Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", p. 3.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, *ibid.*

¹³² Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", pp. 3, 13.

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ Hoffman, "Empathy and Moral Development", p. 161.

¹³⁵ Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", p. 3.

¹³⁶ Hoffman, "Empathy and Moral Development", p. 159.

This categorization is crucial for the understanding the *elicitors* and *conditioners* of empathy in relation to film, because it coincides with the practices of dramatic writing and creating characters that nurture the emotional involvement of film viewers. With the help of this vocabulary, we can see the actual psychological triggers that moviemakers can activate to achieve a needed degree of involvement and emotion. In the next subsections we will use the classification as a backdrop to explore how empathy bias influence the viewer's character engagement, encouraging empathy and deep sensory-affective experiences that will be pivotal for the analysis undertaken further in this study.

2.5.1 Similarity

According to Hoffman and Preston & de Waal, our propensity to feel for and with others is directly proportional to the "perceived overlap" in race, age, gender, and various personality traits.¹³⁷ Within the review of Preston & de Waal, Michael Commons and Chester Wolfson present the core formulation for this fact by asserting that empathy "consists of *me too-isms*".¹³⁸ That is to say, the more the subject has in common with the object of empathy, the more likely the subject will respond with congruence to their emotion.

In agreement with the scientific evidence, Tan says that a necessary basis for cinematic empathy is "recognition in film characters of an inner life that we share with fellow humans, including strivings, concerns, needs, and wishes."¹³⁹ Consequently, in case of fictional stories, we first of all need to feel that the characters are realistic and similar to us in general as human beings and are not mere artifacts. Subsequently we look for attributes we can relate to on a more personal level.

The overall plausibility of movie characters is achieved by the logic and consistency in their actions, motivations, and goals, understandable responses to situations and events, and psychological realism. The latter, as noted by Brinckmann "is specifically tailored to immerse viewers into the events."¹⁴⁰ Also a realistic mode of acting enables a more intensive emotional involvement,¹⁴¹ and lays the foundation for empathy. The constellation of the cast altogether

¹³⁷ Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", p. 3.

¹³⁸ Michael L. Commons, Chester A. Wolfson, "A complete theory of empathy must consider stage changes", Commentary/Preston & de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Issue 25, 2002, p. 30.

¹³⁹ Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading", p. 339.

¹⁴⁰ Brinckmann, "The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study", p. 173.

¹⁴¹ Wulff, "Affektivität als Element der Filmrezeption", p. 114.

is very important, says Brinckmann, as “miscasting can block viewer emotions or guide them in the wrong direction, so that the layout of the plot gets out of joint. On the other hand, talented actors can increase the emotional impact of a scene.”¹⁴²

Moreover, the realistic depiction involves the right amount of flaws in good characters and at least some psychological depth in villains — reflecting the complex human nature that we experience in real life and maybe less so in the mainstream products of entertainment industry that is prone to deliver somewhat simplified worldview to the mass audience. This is why the television antihero protagonist Tony Soprano once became a revolution in the TV storytelling, and Walter White still remains an example of impeccable character writing and character development. They both proved that TV audiences can sympathize with evil characters provided the latter are non-stereotypical multifaceted personalities with some positive human traits or a tangible reason for moral decay. Whereas characters with no inner conflict, flaws, or other depth are often perceived as superficial, one-dimensional and artificial — it can be argued that such characters are apprehended as mere narrative functions rather than persons with whom one might find touch points on a personal level.

As for the viewer's overlap with the characters in terms of gender, age, cultural background etc., it plays a similar role as in real life — it is easier to empathize with the characters similar to us in any regard. This is taken into account in marketing and production when defining the target audience of the media content which strives to be commercially successful. Broadly speaking, it is generally thought that romantic comedies about women in search of love should be targeted foremost at female audiences, and testosterone-packed action films are tailored to meet male preferences. However, regardless of the genre, the mass market needs to appeal to the broad audience and often feature characters with standard socially-approved or aspiring traits, thus attracting the most possible number of the viewers.

Hence, we can conclude that the factor of similarity as proposed by Hoffman and Preston & de Waal materializes in cinematic storytelling through narrative techniques of character writing and development: our propensity to feel with film and television characters depends on whether they feel real and similar to viewers in their own ways. This is also important in case of the serialized content, because television characters have to be interesting enough to stick with them for hours, days or even years.

¹⁴² Brinckmann, “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study”, p. 179.

2.5.2 Familiarity

Familiarity is another empathy-enforcing factor which refers to the fact that we are naturally more prone to care for those in our close social circle — friends, relatives, or people with whom we have had previous experiences — than for strangers.¹⁴³ It is consistent with one of the key dramaturgical goals of nurturing in the viewer the sense of familiarity with the character, whereas a sense of strangeness or distance discourages a deep emotional involvement. Here we can comment on the lack of empathy with the female character in the opening scene in *Jaws*: The viewer simply does not have time to get to know the first victim of the shark, she is a stranger whose personality remains disguised and irrelevant. In any film it would be impossible to care deeply for a character at the very beginning. In this sense, familiarity belongs to a great extent to the form of serialized storytelling, where the audiences spend more time with the characters than in films, while they have more time to develop, reveal, and express themselves, and eventually inhabit organically the mentality of the viewer. It is known that the mere fact of a regular and continuous exposure to recurring personalities in the media gives the spectator a sense of intense attachment,¹⁴⁴ and “a sense of intimacy and proximity” towards TV personalities.¹⁴⁵ With time, this can grow into a parasocial relationship — a phenomenon of building strong social bond with fictional characters based on an “illusionary feeling of being in a mutual social interaction with another character while actually being in a one-sided non-reciprocal situation”¹⁴⁶ as defined by Hartmann. The theory denotes that parasocial relationships “can take various forms, reaching from extreme worshipping, to normal romantic relationships and friendships, to more negative relationships qualified by indifference or even antipathy towards the mediated other.”¹⁴⁷ And just like with non-mediated relationships, we tend to sympathize and empathize with the TV characters the more we know them and be distressed in case of “the involuntarily break-up of parasocial relationships”.¹⁴⁸ This insight is helpful in dealing with the analysis of character engagement

¹⁴³ Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Tilo Hartmann, “Parasocial Interaction, Parasocial Relationships, and Well-Being”, *The Routledge Handbook of Media Use and Well-Being: International Perspectives on Theory and Research on Positive Media Effects*, ed. by Leonard Reinecke/Mary-Beth Oliver, Oxon/New York NY: Routledge 2016, p. 132.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

in regard to long-running TV shows and also gives us an opportunity to enquire into the tangible real-life impact of our engagement with them.

2.5.3 Past experience

Although the aspect of past experience somewhat overlaps with the bias of similarity and familiarity, Preston & de Waal put it in a separate category, highlighting the specifically intense response to the situations of experiencing negative emotions such as pain and distress.¹⁴⁹ Applying their findings to the situation of film spectatorship, we can distinguish between two ways in which certain distressing images set off empathy with the character: through personal experience and experience with the object.¹⁵⁰

The first case concerns one's own firsthand experiences that allow the spectator to vicariously re-enter that emotional state during the portrayal of analogous events on the screen. This mode of empathy development is attributed by Hoffmann to the process of conditioning and direct association.¹⁵¹ One of the prominent studies of the subject was conducted by Sapolsky and Zillmann (1978)¹⁵² who showed "explicit medical films of childbirth"¹⁵³ to women who had given birth and those who had not. In contrast to the latter, women who had given birth displayed extremely intense physiological responses and described an exceptional empathic involvement.¹⁵⁴ It can be argued that the corporeal aspects of the experience add to the intensity of the empathic response, because the viewer is likely not only to undergo the cognitive-affective process of empathy, but also emotional contagion and motor mimicry, in which case all the parallel processes reinforce each other and contribute to the emotional congruence between the subject and object.

A more recent evidence of empathy based on personal experience can be observed within the context of the #MeToo movement, whose existence and virality are a vivid manifestation of the definition of empathy by Commons & Wolfsont.¹⁵⁵ The personal stories of experiencing sexual harassment and assault as shared on social media via the corresponding hashtag

¹⁴⁹ Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵¹ Hoffman, "Empathy and Moral Development", p. 161.

¹⁵² Zillmann, "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama", p. 43.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ It is being referred to the aforementioned statement "empathy consists of *me too-isms*" in 2.5.1; Commons, Wolfsont, "A complete theory of empathy must consider stage changes", p. 30.

conform to what Hoffmann describes as the mode of empathic affect arousal through the language-mediated association. He maintains that in this process, “verbal cues in the immediate situation that are associated through their semantic meaning with affectively charged events in the observer’s past may now evoke the events’ affect in the observer.”¹⁵⁶ The #MeToo phenomenon is also illustrative of the social impact of sharing the other’s distress, as seen in the fact that the story published by the object of empathy (the author) serves as a cue to the subject (the reader) to share their own experience. Thus grows a chain reaction that affects not only personal lives of people but also corporate policies and practices, which indicates that similarity, familiarity and past experience play a crucial role in the emotional engagement and social behavior.

Apart from that, we also witness how past experiences strike a chord with the audience when disturbing stories gain spotlight in the media. For instance, the largest anti-sexual assault organization in the U.S. have reported a tendency in increased amount of hotline calls from victims of sexual abuse seeking emotional support after the news of sexual assault allegations¹⁵⁷ or watching documentaries such as *Leaving Neverland* (2019)¹⁵⁸ or *Surviving R Kelly* (2019).¹⁵⁹ In this regard, similar cases of distress are not only indicative of personal emotional involvement but also of a traumatic effect of such content on certain audience groups.

Another aspect of the way past experience correlates with the empathic response, according to Preston & de Waal, concerns the fact that the subject will experience a greater degree of distress when observing distress of a familiar or similar individual, or someone with whom they have had previous encounters.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the stronger the relationship, similarity, and familiarity are, the more profuse is the empathic response.¹⁶¹

Preston & de Waal explain that past experience with the object gives us a greater context for understanding their point of view as well as “associations to previous instances of distress in

¹⁵⁶ Hoffman, “Empathy and Moral Development”, p. 161.

¹⁵⁷ Willa Frej, “Sexual Assault Hotline Calls Spiked During Kavanaugh Hearing”, 28.09.2018, guce.huffpost.com/copyConsent?sessionId=3_cc-session_8b575a95-39db-4aa7-b7b7-19b3d504bdaa&lang=en-us, 09.11.2019.

¹⁵⁸ Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), “RAINN Statement on HBO Michael Jackson Child Sexual Abuse Documentary Leaving Neverland”, 04.03.2019, www.rainn.org/news/rainn-statement-hbo-michael-jackson-child-sexual-abuse-documentary-leaving-neverland, 10.11.2019.

¹⁵⁹ Sabrina Barr, “Sexual Assault Helpline Reports Surge in Calls During ‘Surviving R Kelly’ Documentary”, www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/surviving-r-kelly-sexual-assault-abuse-helpline-calls-rainn-lifetime-documentary-a8719546.html, 10.11.2019.

¹⁶⁰ Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 16.

¹⁶¹ *ibid*.

the object, the object's attitude toward the situation, the long-term consequences the distress will have on the object.”¹⁶² Based on that, we are naturally liable to perspective-taking with and sharing the feelings of the other.

In the act of film spectatorship, we are likely to undergo the aforementioned mechanism of affect development based on the way the protagonist is presented and how the narrative context influences his or her actual and emotional journey. The more we know about the main character, the easier it is to enter into an emotional engagement with him or her, understanding his or her desires, motivation, reactions and feelings. In a serialized program, the mere fact of a longer engagement with the protagonist from one episode to another strengthens the emotional bond of familiarity and past experience. Consequently, all three aforementioned empathy bias are very closely related and mostly serve the similar function of approximating the viewpoint of the viewer with that of the protagonist and building a strong parasocial relationship with them.

2.5.4 Learning and conditioning

As apprehended by Hoffman and Preston & de Waal, learning concerns the role of conditioning in the process of building behavior patterns and empathetic orientation. According to the theory, encountering an emotional event or observing someone else's reaction to it gives us a frame of reference for evaluating and reacting to such events in future. In Hoffman's words, “empathic distress becomes a conditioned response to others' distress by observing others' distress while experiencing actual distress.”¹⁶³ Translated to the act of film spectatorship, it means that when the viewer feels fear while something frightening occurs which also scares the character, the congruence of this emotion will establish a pattern for future empathic responses in the following distressing scenes.

Apart from that, we can extrapolate the theory to discuss how the film storytelling and film medium in general condition the emotional orientation of the audience. Because conditioning develops with time and experience, the aspect of film literacy plays a role in the way we respond to films. This premise was investigated in an important experiment by Ildirar in 2008.¹⁶⁴ In the study conducted in Turkey, people who have never seen movies or television

¹⁶² Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 16.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁶⁴ Sermin Ildirar, “Do film illiterates understand basic cinematographic principles?”, *International Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 43, Issue 3-4, 2008, pp. 20–25.

were given clips that included various kinds of shots, montage and camera techniques. Subsequently, their responses were compared to those of more experienced viewers. Oatley describes the results as following:

“People with 10 or more years’ experience of film viewing could understand the meanings conveyed by all these techniques. Those with no film experience and those with only 5 years’ experience could not understand the meanings of jump cuts, panning, and establishing shots, but - perhaps surprisingly - they could understand the meanings of ellipsis and parallel montage.”¹⁶⁵

As follows from this example, the experience with the film medium and its conventions enable the viewer to apprehend easily the meaning of the cinematic language and what it conveys. This is crucial for perceiving any given story in its wholeness, in which information and emotion come in a flow without mental interruptions and distractions caused by the formal aspects of the image.

An experience with the film storytelling is also manifested in the way we respond to conventions pertained to certain genres, all of which have a specific set of devices aiming at intended emotional experience of the audience. One of the key factors enabling that, says Smith, is the mood or atmosphere. According to him, mood is “a compass that guides the audience through the whole story”¹⁶⁶ and gives the viewer the capacity to build an appropriate emotional orientation. It has to be established in the very first moments of the film and be sustained throughout it, namely through visual and sound cues: music score, lighting, set design, editing, camera movement, etc.

We learn the meaning of such cues intuitively or through experience, and picking up on their meaning we attune to the emotions channeled by the film. For instance, we know that a gloomy setting, dark color scheme and disharmonic music indicates a suspenseful, bleak and earnest story. Whereas a quick-paced beginning with dynamic uplifting music and bright colors puts the viewer at ease promising a light-hearted entertainment, e.g. a comedy. The viewer, consequently, doesn’t expect to be scared or go through deep affective states in the course of such films. When comedy heroes are in trouble, the audience would not apprehend the conflict as a cue for a serious concern or fear. Empathy would be unlikely in such cases. Therefore, the established mood should be consistent with the subject and idea of the film in order to elicit intended emotional responses in the course of the screening. If empathy is an

¹⁶⁵ Oatley, “How Cues on Screen Prompt Emotions in the Mind”, p. 279.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, p. 42.

aspiring factor for filmmakers, the mood will be appropriately sustained in the course of the film in order to maintain emotional involvement of the audience.

To that, Wulff notes that empathy is triggered by a framework of cues, and when this framework changes, the empathic predisposition changes too.¹⁶⁷ For example, when the hero of an action film falls from the roof and turns up not hurt, the viewer will be unlikely to be as much scared the next time the hero faces danger. On the other hand, there are, of course, demanding and complex films that play with genre conventions and viewer expectations, which, if this schema of unpredictability is introduced early, creates a suspenseful orientation for the viewer, putting him or her in a vulnerable position that might even be uncomfortable for some.

It should be noted that conditioning has its extremes. On the one hand, its lack results in the viewer not making sense of the cinematic language, as was shown in the aforementioned experiment. On the other hand, certain storytelling techniques may become an overused cliché and fail to elicit an intended response in the experienced audience. For instance, an experienced viewer would presumably react differently to a scene, in which a character is going to a dark basement, than someone who sees a horror movie for the first time. Although both would react in congruence with the victim, the experienced one would have had time to anticipate the outcome and acquire a more external and detached view on the situation. Additionally, a large number of clichés in a film can result in an alienating experience altogether, because in such cases the artificial quality of the film comes to the fore and it fails to trigger the positive affective disposition and psychological realism.

2.5.5 Proximity and salience

The studies of Hoffman and Preston & de Waal mention the role of proximity and salience in stimulating an empathic response, however the latter incorporate proximity into salience rather than diving them. Nevertheless, the three authors refer to the same process describing an intensive stimulation of emotion and attention toward the object.

According to Hoffman, the closer we are to the object of empathy, the more we are prone to share their feelings and concerns.¹⁶⁸ This statement presents an interesting premise for film analysis, because proximity is one of the most affective intrinsic modalities unique to its

¹⁶⁷ Hans J. Wulff, "Das empathische Feld. Film und Psychologie nach der kognitiven Phase?", *Schriftenreihe der Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft (GFM)*, hg. v. Sellmer/Wulff, Marburg: Schüren Verlag 2002, p. 112.

¹⁶⁸ Hoffman, "Empathy and Moral Development", p. 159.

medium. Knut Hickethier famously said that merely watching moving images creates a special state of mental proximity that engages us emotionally with the spectacle — through immediacy and directness of the image, regardless whether it is close or far from us on screen, there is still “something that grasps us”.¹⁶⁹ This observation concerns a special sensory quality of cinematic image that grants us a panoptic vision over the events in front the camera. Commenting on this fact, Brinckmann describes why the experience of film spectatorship creates emotional and attentional involvement as opposed to the real-life events:

“In real life, we have to reckon with crises that quickly abate, with the drama of everyday life fading or shifting to another location inaccessible to us. In this case, our heightened emotionality dissolves, since the drama remains open and we do not get to experience the conclusion. By contrast, films select, condense, and intensify, making images and sound more concise and choosing their protagonists according to their ability to reveal themselves on screen. And most importantly, they only select worthwhile events endowed with meaning.”¹⁷⁰

Therefore, the condensation and intensification are inherent to film storytelling, and explain the nature of mental proximity with the stories we watch, at least with the narrative ones. In this connection, we arrive at the term *salience* that is apprehended by Preston & de Waal as the “strength of perceptual signal”.¹⁷¹ Their research has shown that the empathic response of the subject correlates with the stimuli that stand out in the otherwise normal representations: e.g. perceptually loud signals, releasing stimuli like crying or screaming, realistic depictions, or objects placed in extreme proximity to the subject.¹⁷² Inadvertently, such elements make up a substantial part of the cinematic storytelling and are known for their affective influence on the spectator.

In regard to the latter, Carroll uses the word *salient* in a similar way — to describe verbal images of “formal prominence”¹⁷³ in films. In other words, these are shots, scenes, or certain visual or auditory cues that give objects a prominent position in film, which call for our attention, direct and focalize it, intensifying the emotion of the moment. He refers foremost to close-up shots in this context, but there are also many other means of marking something in film as important and render some intensification, such as the use of slow motion (e.g. the

¹⁶⁹ Knut Hickethier, “Die Sehnsucht der Bilder. Opakheit und Transparenz, Begehren und Emotionalitaet in den filmischen Bildern”, *Mit allen Sinnen: Gefühl und Empfindung im Kino*, hg. v. Susanne Marschall/Fabienne Liptay, Marburg: Schüren 2006, p. 430.

¹⁷⁰ Brinckmann, “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study”, p. 177.

¹⁷¹ Preston, de Waal, “Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases”, p. 3.

¹⁷² *ibid.*, pp. 3, 18.

¹⁷³ Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 198.

scene with dodging bullets in *The Matrix*), dramatic use of color (e.g. the red cloak in the otherwise black-and-white *Schindler's List*), music cues (e.g. scoring of the shower scene in *Psycho*). Such and other formal aspects of film, says Brinkmann, contribute to our ability to empathize, because the act of intensification is virtually equal to the stronger emotional involvement and stimulating affective reaction. Besides, strong stimuli in film are also found in physical representations such as face expressions, gestures, movements or actions. A shot of a face stricken with grief or a body being mutilated are salient in that they go beyond the normal state of order and invite not only cognitive-affective responses, but also a reflective mechanism of mimicry or sensory-motor empathy.¹⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the close-up shot is one of the best examples both of salience and proximity in the mechanism of evoking empathy in film. In contrast to the informational close-up shot like zooming in on an object for visibility needed for narrative purposes, a close-up shot of the protagonist's face is foremost a tool of affective power, used to communicate character's feelings and thoughts in a way that often evokes empathy, emotional contagion and facial mimicry in the audience.

Jacques Aumont says that the size of the image is one of "the fundamental elements which determine the relationship that a spectator can establish between his or her own space and the plastic space of the image."¹⁷⁵ The closeness of the viewer to the subject on the screen obliterates the sense of distance and leads the spectator to "extreme psychic proximity or intimacy".¹⁷⁶ This interaction is often assumed to be a tangible experience: Anne Rutherford refers to it as "tactile",¹⁷⁷ Balázs calls it "palpable",¹⁷⁸ and Aumont describes it as "the metaphor of visual touch".¹⁷⁹ During such an encounter, the boundaries both of the physical and mental space that separate us from the character disappear, enabling the spectator to enter into a state of susceptibility to the emotion of the other, to be not only attuned to the emotion but also, says Aumont, to be "dominated, even crushed, by it".¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ Adriano D'Alòia, "The Character's Body and the Viewer: Cinematic Empathy and Embodied Simulation in the Film Experience", *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, ed. by Maarten Coegnarts and Peter Kavanja, Leuven: Leuven University Press 2015, p. 189.

¹⁷⁵ Jacques Aumont, *The image* (1. publ. ed.), London: British Film Institute 1997, p. 102.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁷⁷ Anne Rutherford, "'Buddhas Made of Ice and Butter': Mimetic Visuality, Transience and the Documentary Image", *Third Text*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2206, pp. 27-39, doi.org/10.1080/09528820500483545.

¹⁷⁸ Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, p. 61.

¹⁷⁹ Aumont, *The image*, p. 105.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 103.

The natural psychological reaction to the close-up is coordinated by the size of the object and the shallow depth of field, which isolates the subject from the background rendering the latter irrelevant and abstruse. Thus the camera directs the viewer's gaze to the subject, marking salient the destination point of the viewer's attention, whereas the scale of the viewer's emotion grows together with the scale of the subject displayed. While a wide shot puts into view the ample space of an image allowing the viewer's concentration to wander, an object taking up most of the screen, grabs our attention fully and hypnotizes with the engrossing emotion.

Moreover, when the close-up is accompanied by other emotional cues, especially those extending its duration, the intensification escalates accordingly. One quality of a close-up, said Balász, is that it releases an "inner experience of duration".¹⁸¹ And the longer the camera stays close to the face, the more we are getting involved in the chemistry with the character's emotion. Therefore, the combination of the close-up with a long take or slow motion is an effective way to seize the viewer, while additional narrative and cinematic cues further contribute to the salience of the stimulus eliciting empathy, emotional contagion and motor mimicry.

Such scenes are referred to by Plantinga as *scenes of empathy*: in them, the close-up of the face stays on the screen for a long time to elicit a strong affective response.¹⁸² This can be done in either a long shot, or a sequence of alternating shots, where nonetheless the face remains in a "prolonged concentration".¹⁸³ Plantinga maintains that apart from the common, informational use of the face on film, the scenes of empathy have the primary function to show emotion and elicit an emotional response. In this act, "a pace of the narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention."¹⁸⁴

Such scenes may be called anti-narrative because they last longer than necessary to communicate information and emotion of the character, and the prolonged duration goes beyond the informational point aiming to evoke a heightened sensory state in the viewer. Therefore, scenes of empathy can also be interpreted as a form of cinematic excess. The notion of such scenes is very important for understanding empathy in film because it shows

¹⁸¹ Noa Steimatsky, *The face on film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017, p. 28.

¹⁸² Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film", p. 239.

¹⁸³ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

the complex process of layering of film's techniques in order to illuminate the inner life of the character in most possible ways and enhance the cognitive-affective processes of the viewer. In this case, the empathetic response is enabled by a combination of acting, directing, camerawork, editing, and, depending on the film, may be amplified by music, color, etc. So scenes of empathy, Plantinga says, should be seen as a "combination of techniques and strategies, where everything reinforces each other."¹⁸⁵

As we have seen, the terms *elicitors*, *conditioners* and the concept of *empathy bias* offer quite a comprehensive view on the mechanisms in which films can evoke empathy in the spectator, and provide a necessary vocabulary for the analysis of film emotions. Besides, an important takeaway from this overview is that empathy is a proximate and highly subjective experience whose occurrence and intensity depends on a number of factors — from gender and past experience to the level of familiarity and physical proximity to the object. Altogether, applying these findings to a practical analysis we can learn more about the language of the cinema and how it affects our experience of film spectatorship.

2.6 Role of empathy in the experience of film spectatorship

This study is rooted in the assumption that empathy in the act of film spectatorship is able to provide a deep affective experience to the viewer, one that is quite distinct from other emotional processes that don't require congruence or perspective-taking with film characters. It is widely acknowledged that the prime reasons we watch films in general is the emotional experience and entertainment they offer, as well as the desire to learn about the world and ourselves. Films that involve viewers empathically fulfill all these conditions, and arguably can have a positive psychological impact that is transferred to the real world.

According to Bernhardt and Singer, empathy with other people including strangers "allows us to predict and understand their feelings, motivations, and actions."¹⁸⁶ Accordingly, empathy is associated with moral development and prosocial and altruistic behavior.¹⁸⁷ In psychology, there is a concept known as *compassionate empathy* or *empathic concern* — one that moves us to take action and help those with whom we empathize.¹⁸⁸ Likewise, it is possible to

¹⁸⁵ Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film", p. 255.

¹⁸⁶ Bernhardt, Singer, "The Neural Basis of Empathy", p. 2.

¹⁸⁷ Preston, de Waal, "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases", p. 4.

¹⁸⁸ Daniel Goleman, 12.07.2007, Blog: www.danielgoleman.info/three-kinds-of-empathy-cognitive-emotional-compassionate, 16.03.2020.

experience compassionate empathy through the medium film and so affect changes that go beyond the act of film spectatorship.

“If the sense of being in another reality is the most typical ingredient of the film experience, then the awareness of being gripped by empathy with film characters is second best”,¹⁸⁹ says Tan. Indeed, films give us a unique opportunity to shift perspectives, to enjoy fantasies or experience danger in a safe way. Films have a power to condition our worldview, so that we can learn from the behavior of the characters on screen. They have an ability to hold a mirror to our lives and the human nature; they explicate our fears, transgressions, and desires. They transmit certain values and shine light on the stories that would never been known otherwise — bringing to the public’s attention stories of the underprivileged and underrepresented. Going through a profound empathic experience with these may not only lead to personal revelations and shifting perspective but also be capable of social change.

It should be noted that although empathy is undeniably important for emotional engagement with movies or television series, it is not equally significant for the experience of spectatorship across the broad spectrum of various genres and formats of film and television. The longest-running American primetime scripted series *Simpsons*, for instance, has been airing for thirty one years — which is a sign of the undeniable success, but one that emanates from easy entertainment and humorous social commentary rather than strong affective impact. Another record-breakers on television — the longest-running procedurals *Law&Order* and *Law&Order: SVU* showcase dramatic and distressing crime stories that in the first place aim to satisfy the viewer’s fascination for solving puzzles, light thrills and the triumph of justice. Although sympathy and empathy also play a role in such stories where victims are concerned, the standard television format allows for only minimal degree of involvement with the characters but neither does it aspire to do so.

In other words, the role of empathy is very subject-specific and can not be generalized completely. This is why the scholarly discussion should include more applicable material to improve the understanding of the phenomenon and also challenge some constricted beliefs. Considering once again the Carroll’s rejection of empathy based on improper examples we can argue that the material of the study of empathy is still the main factor of understanding cinematic empathy because the tools of its eliciting can vary from one film to another. Some

¹⁸⁹ Tan, “The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading”, p. 337.

movies, like *Jaws*, prefer to arouse suspense by separating perspectives of the viewer from that of the characters. Others, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, place the viewer in total confines of the character's perspective, enforcing the experience of events at the same time and with the same strength as the protagonist herself. In the following, we will attempt to produce a comprehensive overview of the empathy-inducing techniques and elaborate on the role of empathy in the series.

3. *The Handmaid's Tale*, a timely dystopia

The series *The Handmaid's Tale* is the most recent adaptation of the dystopian novel of the same name by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Published in 1985, this is a story set in an undefined future in the Northeast of the United States. In the wake of an environmental catastrophe and plummeting birthrates, the liberal American government gets overthrown by a group of Christian fundamentalists called the Sons of Jacob, whose ideology is based on the Old Testament, totalitarian principles, social cleansing and stratification within a patriarchal system.

With the agenda to solve the reproduction crisis, the established Republic of Gilead abolishes women's rights and freedoms, prescribing each woman a place in a severely restricted hierarchy based on the marital status and reproductive abilities. On the top of the ladder are the Wives of the Commanders; their housemaids are Marthas — unmarried infertile women. Those who are married and have children become Econowives. Other fertile women are allocated to the roles of Handmaids and are forced to bear children for the Commanders and their barren wives through the legalized form of sexual slavery — based on the Biblical precedent of Rachel and Leah story. Wearing red cloaks and face-concealing white bonnets, they live in captivity and have their babies taken away once they are born. If they fail to get pregnant, they will be blamed and punished by being sent off to the Colonies, where they will soon die of emaciation and toxic exposure.

The Handmaids are schooled in a re-education facility overseen by faithful "Aunts" who taser victims of liberal mindset into the acceptance of their fate. "This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary,"¹⁹⁰ says Aunt Lydia to the girls whose bodies and lives have been appropriated, and progressively, it does.

Gilead works to normalize the new reality of its making operating by the textbook authoritarian brainwashing and propaganda: the history and facts get misinterpreted, distorted, or plainly erased; the possessions are confiscated, the books burned, the buildings renamed, repurposed or demolished, the information controlled and free speech absent. The women are not allowed to write and read even the Bible — the legislative source of the state. The state conducts a purge of dissidents and other-thinkers, female scientists and doctors who perform abortions, non-Christians, and "gender-traitors", i.e. homosexuals. The sin of being other than

¹⁹⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 43.

a heterosexual conformist of Gilead is punished by hanging on the city wall. Minor acts of civil disobedience — like reading — are disciplined by physical or psychological torture. The brutality of these acts is justified by the “word of God” in the interpretation of the self-proclaimed leaders, whose cruel politics and ubiquitous surveillance ensure subjugation, self-censorship, and compliance from the subjects.

The novel is told from the point of view of Handmaid Offred, whose real name remains unknown. In Gilead, all the Handmaids are called by a patronymic derived from the name of the Commanders they are assigned to, respectively changing with each new posting, which effectively contributes to their degrading ability to having a sense of complete and whole self. Neither their real names nor their lives belong to them anymore, and even the smallest activities like eating and having a bath is regulated by others. With that, the only thing a Handmaid owns is her thoughts and memories, which, considering the impossibility to escape, is a blessing as well as a curse.

As the first-generation witness of the Gileadean regime, Offred still remembers the times before the revolution. Her narration is interwoven with flashbacks and musings of the past alluding to then escalating tensions in the society and revealing in fragments the backstory of her life with husband Luke and their daughter Hannah, both of whom she lost while attempting to flee. The contrast between a woman who once enjoyed a privilege of living in a free democratic society and who is now a slave in the brutal political regime builds a foundation for a chilling effect of the story, with the most affecting part being that it is not really a far-fetched scenario considering the long human history of the real world.

By and large *The Handmaid's Tale* explores a wide spectrum of subjects such as power, freedom and oppression, misogyny and abuse, motherhood, feminism, human and civil rights, political propaganda, segregation, religion, radicalism, ecological threats, as well as historical and political cycles. But foremost, the leading theme of the novel is that of giving a voice to the female story — both in the patriarchal society and the literary world of male-dominated dystopian fictions.

Significant in the context of this study is the attribution of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the genre speculative fiction, which Atwood opposes to science fiction.¹⁹¹ Unlike most common dystopias that depict futuristic worlds, the plot of the novel is based on actual instances of

¹⁹¹ Margaret Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”, *The New York Times*, 10.03.2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur, 10.03.2020.

socio-political injustices, misogynistic laws and totalitarian oppression, and basically features nothing that has not happened before in our history. Just a few examples would be the history of American polygamy and slavery, the far-right ideologies, group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the Lebensborn program of the SS, the removal of indigenous children from their families in Australia, and the stealing of children of abducted and imprisoned mothers in Argentina.¹⁹² But even beyond that, the novel presents a condensed and magnified image of the whole spectrum of the female routine subjugation to the policies controlling women's bodies and behavior, just as it is a picture on the larger scale of the society that oversees and tolerates all that is inhuman, regressive and tyrannical. At that, the novel not only highlights some things cyclical and some perpetually ongoing, but also warns of the dangers of not learning from the history and not caring for the present.

Much of the themes in *The Handmaid's Tale* were informed by the immediate experience that surrounded Atwood from the very childhood. Born in 1939, she grew up with an insight into the fragility of the world order which permeated the years of World War II, the following Korean and Vietnam wars, the constant Cold War paranoia of nuclear annihilation and persecution of enemies of the state in the McCarthy era.

As Atwood lived in the United States and Europe, the scale and outreach of local and international conflicts was a persistent subject of a study for the writer's mind. Among many other events, it was the 1979 Iranian revolution that demonstrated one modern nation's shift to the totalitarian theocracy and so also became a great influence¹⁹³ on the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Besides, at the time of writing the novel in 1984, which itself is an important year for dystopian literature, Atwood worked from a home in West Berlin, getting an immediate experience of living in an occupied territory:

“Every Sunday the East German Air Force made sonic booms to remind us of how close they were. During my visits to several countries behind the Iron Curtain — Czechoslovakia, East Germany — I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing. So did the repurposed buildings. “This used to belong to ... but then they disappeared.” I heard such stories many times.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”.

¹⁹³ Penguin Random House UK, “Margaret Atwood on the real-life events that inspired *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*”, *Penguin Random House UK*, 9.09.2019, www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/sep/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-testaments-real-life-inspiration/, 4.04.2020.

¹⁹⁴ Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”.

Given the tendencies already in motion at that time, among them the discovery of toxic chemicals in animals and rising infertility rates due to radiation damage,¹⁹⁵ Atwood speculated about the direction in which the world could go further. How would political leaders tackle existing and looming problems? What crisis could lead to an autocratic takeover in the United States of America, a beacon of democracy? Why and how would it happen? How would an American totalitarianism look like? Observing that “true dictatorships don’t come *in* in good times”,¹⁹⁶ Atwood focused on the emerging environmental and reproduction threats, the issues that call for some kind of a radical controlling tool. Using the American puritan tradition and the fact that “totalitarianism always has views on who shall be allowed to have babies and what shall be done with the babies”,¹⁹⁷ Atwood’s projection shows a future that demonstrates the recurrence of history:

“The ability to conceive and bear a healthy child would become rare, and thus valued; and we all know who gets most - in any society - of things that are rare and valued. Those at the top ... There are lots of precedents for this practice, but my society, being derived from Puritanism, would, of course, need biblical sanction. Luckily for them, Old Testament patriarchs were notoriously polygamous; the text they chose as their cornerstone is the story of Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob, and their baby competition. When they themselves ran out of babies, they pressed their handmaids into service and counted their babies as their own, thus providing a biblical justification for surrogate motherhood.”¹⁹⁸

In this scenario, the woman’s place would have to be at home, her time fully dedicated to the only duty of motherhood. The laws would be changing gradually and then suddenly, ultimately rendering it impossible for women to own property, hold jobs, get abortions, divorce, vote, and have a say in their lives in general. The mission to obtain children for the state would be a priority and a vindication, however savage the means.

The Handmaid’s Tale was written 36 years ago as a warning and a speculation. In May 2017, shortly after the *Hulu* adaptation premiered on April 26th, a group of women dressed in handmaid cloaks and bonnets appeared at the Texas State Capitol to silently protest the state’s decision to restrict women’s abortion rights.¹⁹⁹ In the following two years, as the U.S. have

¹⁹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose: 1982-2005*, New York NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers 2005, p. 98.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Patt Morrison, “Q&A: Margaret Atwood on why ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ is more relevant now than ever”, *Los Angeles Times*, 19.04.2017, www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-ol-patt-morrison-margaret-atwood-hulu-handmaiden-20170419-htmlstory.html, 10.02.2020.

¹⁹⁸ Atwood, *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose: 1982-2005*, p. 99.

¹⁹⁹ Laura Bradley, “Under Their Eye: The Rise of *Handmaid’s Tale*-Inspired Protesters”, *Vanity Fair*, 9.10.2018, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/photos/2018/10/handmaids-tale-protests-kavanaugh-healthcare-womens-march?verso=true, 10.03.2020.

been swept by an “unprecedented”²⁰⁰ rise of anti-abortion laws, the handmaids’ uniform has become a constant presence at U.S. courts, senate hearings and demonstrations, also inspiring similar movements worldwide.²⁰¹ The regression to conservative policies that curb women’s rights to their bodies made Atwood’s speculations exceptionally topical in the present world and attracted people’s attention to the new adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Although the novel has been well known and already adapted to a movie, opera and radio play, its emergence as a television series certainly stroke a chord with the public in a particularly strong way. One of the reasons is that it met the current zeitgeist defined by the resurgence of far-right politics and the #MeToo movement. Considering this premise as well as the real-life parallels of the subjects illuminated in the series, journalist Lisa Miller is one of many who deems *The Handmaid’s Tale* “important television”.²⁰² In her article for *The Cut* she mentions that the topicality of the series is one of the main reasons that audiences are attracted to it, yet it is also a common experience for many that the *Hulu* adaptation is extremely hard to watch. Specifically, she says, it has a harrowing effect due to an intimate presentation of the protagonist’s enslaved existence, one that engages and disturbs making one feel “as if you were looking through a peephole into a crime scene.”²⁰³

Indeed, the approach to the storytelling of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is oriented on the immersion into Offred’s suffering, making her pain not only visible but also palpable and contagious, triggering the gravest human anxieties to be experienced in full force together with the protagonist through a cumulative blend of narrative and cinematic techniques. While sharing personal experiences, scores of viewers have expressed the strain of the show’s emotional effect. Many tend to describe the state of a “prolonged fear”²⁰⁴ while watching the *Hulu* adaptation; Others refer to watching it as “a terrifying chore”,²⁰⁵ which describes the fact of endurance rather than enjoyment; Some need “to take breaks to cry or to otherwise

²⁰⁰ Elizabeth Nash et al., “Radical Attempts to Ban Abortion Dominate State Policy Trends in the First Quarter of 2019”, *Guttmacher Institute*, 3.04.2019, www.guttmacher.org/article/2019/04/radical-attempts-ban-abortion-dominate-state-policy-trends-first-quarter-2019, 1.04.2020.

²⁰¹ Peter Beaumont, Amanda Holpuch, "How The Handmaid's Tale dressed protests across the world", *The Guardian*, 3.08.2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/03/how-the-handmaids-tale-dressed-protests-across-the-world, 3.03.2020.

²⁰² Lisa Miller, “The Relentless Torture of *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, *The Cut*, 2.05.2018, www.thecut.com/2018/05/the-handmaids-tale-season-2-review.html, 3.03.2020.

²⁰³ *ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Taylor Stokes, “Review: ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ is really, truly terrifying”, *The Diamondback*, 08.05.2017, www.dbknews.com/2017/05/08/review-the-handmaids-tale-show, 04.04.2020.

²⁰⁵ Emma Gray, Laura Bassett, “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Has Its First Real Me Too Moment”, *Huffpost*, 13.06.2018, www.huffpost.com/entry/handmaids-tale-me-too-moment_n_5b1f2fe0e4b09d7a3d7621ad, 04.04.2020.

decompress.”²⁰⁶ Many tend to approach the series “with dread, morbid fascination, or resignation rather than any kind of pleasure”,²⁰⁷ or avoid watching it whatsoever.²⁰⁸ Merely the scope of the emotionally-charged feedback is indicative of a remarkable affective power of the series. Clearly, the demonstrated afflictions spread to the audience and take the central role in their experience, which describes exactly the kind of the congruent emotional response we define as empathy. With the aim to explain how *The Handmaid’s Tale* achieves this emotional effect, the next chapters will deal with the overall style and storytelling techniques of the series, proceeding to analyze the specific empathy-inducing strategies that manipulate the bias of empathy, force perspective-taking and identification with the protagonist.

²⁰⁶ Rachel Robison-Greene (ed.), “Resisting Dystopia”, *The Handmaid’s Tale and Philosophy*, Chicago: Open Court 2019, p. 15.

²⁰⁷ Hudson et al., “Is The Handmaid’s Tale still worth the agony of watching it?”

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*

4. TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*: production, plot, and structure of the *Hulu* series

“This hadn’t been made into a series for a long time for a reason,”²⁰⁹ states Bruce Miller, the executive producer and showrunner of *Hulu’s The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the extensive interview²¹⁰ with Kara Swisher he describes the demands of adapting the complex and subtle Atwood’s prose into a long-running serialized program. While preserving the original tone and narrative style of the book was crucial for this project, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has a rather non-conventional premise by the network television standards. In terms of style, it is defined by the contemplative slow pace of the narration, the first-person narration and flashbacks — techniques that are famously disliked by producers.²¹¹ And in terms of substance, *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers remarkably little gratification for the viewer: here, the evil continuously aggravates, sending the innocent protagonist, and accordingly the viewer who roots for her from the low point to even lower, forcing both sides to stay in the dark and oppressive Gilead. Journalist Lisa Miller compares the viewing experience of the series to “a beating that never ends.”²¹² This, it must be pointed out, is a conscious decision made by the authors of the series. “It’s not a show that you can say is enjoyable all the time”, Bruce Miller agrees, “A lot of times, it’s a tough, tough world, and she [the protagonist] has to make tough decisions, and it’s infuriating.”²¹³ Considering that serials demand from the audience their attention for hours of binge-watching, or weeks and even years of moderate consumption, this makes the viewing experience exceptionally challenging and discomforting.

The level of creative freedom and the scope of challenges that the authors were able to give to the viewers are explained by the fact that *The Handmaid’s Tale* was tailored for the paid online streaming service *Hulu*. Being independent from narrative, programming, and commercial constraints of network or cable television, online platforms are more inclined towards a versatile content, experimental forms and complex narratives. Looking for a

²⁰⁹ Recode Staff, “Full transcript: ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode”, *Vox*, 7.07.2017, www.vox.com/2017/6/7/15758374/transcript-handmaids-tale-writer-producer-bruce-miller-hulu-streaming-recode-decode, 04.04.2020

²¹⁰ *ibid.*

²¹¹ Recode Staff, “Full transcript: ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode”.

²¹² Miller, “The Relentless Torture of *The Handmaid’s Tale*”.

²¹³ Josh Wigler, “Handmaid’s Tale’ Creator Bruce Miller Defends Divisive Finale”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 12.07.2018, www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/handmaids-tale-season-2-finale-bruce-miller-defends-backlash-1126662, 04.04.2020.

flagship original content to run exclusively on their platform, *Hulu* commissioned *The Handmaid's Tale* as a straight-to-series program,²¹⁴ i.e. ordered the whole first season without seeing the pilot. Consequently, *The Handmaid's Tale* was expected to be a high-quality product that could help *Hulu* develop its own content pool and gain more subscribers. Miller highlights several conditions of creating the show for the platform that influenced the strategies of storytelling of the series.

Firstly, considering the *Hulu*'s exclusive rights to the adaptation, it was made foremost for the subscribers of the streaming service, i.e. for a limited audience which is considerably smaller in number than the audience of national television networks. This gave Miller certain freedom to maintain the integrity of the initial idea. As he notes, "it allows me to be more specific and just tell this story, and not try to tell this story to people who don't listen to this story. Tell it to the people who are going to seek it out."²¹⁵ Therefore, the transgressive themes of the show didn't need to be avoided or softened in order to appeal to the wide audience with different tastes and expectations. Instead, the creators could concentrate on the storytelling that enhances the emotional effect of the show's themes.

As a result, *The Handmaid's Tale* became a great success, won critical acclaim,²¹⁶ became the most-watched premiere²¹⁷ on *Hulu* and did drive a growth of subscriptions.²¹⁸ Besides, after the successful initial run on the platform, the show was licensed to other streaming platforms and network television. Now it qualifies as a prime-time serial, which means that what originally was a niche television product has gained a mainstream status, and also considering the multitude of parodies and references to the show in the media, it has become a pop-culture phenomenon.

Secondly, in contrast to network television, there is no programming flow on *Hulu*, therefore the episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale* have a variable length — anywhere between 41 and 61 minutes.²¹⁹ For the creative process it means that the story can be told with the focus on the quality rather than on structural constraints. Not being bound by a specific running time,

²¹⁴ Cynthia Littleton, "How MGM Birthed 'The Handmaid's Tale' for TV", *Variety*, 12.07.2017, variety.com/2017/tv/news/the-handmaids-tale-bruce-miller-reed-morano-mgm-television-1202493275/, 04.04.2020.

²¹⁵ Recode Staff, "Full transcript: 'The Handmaid's Tale' writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode".

²¹⁶ Nardine Saad, "Hulu's brutal 'Handmaid's Tale' earns a glowing critical reception", *Los Angeles Times*, 26.04.2017, www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-handmaids-tale-hulu-critics-reviews-20170426-story.html, 4.04.2020.

²¹⁷ Josef Adalian, "How *The Handmaid's Tale* Changed the Game for Hulu", *Vulture*, 17.09.2017, www.vulture.com/2017/09/hulu-the-handmaids-tale-how-it-changed-the-game.html, 4.04.2020.

²¹⁸ *ibid.*

²¹⁹ Recode Staff, "Full transcript: 'The Handmaid's Tale' writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode".

Miller explains, influences the storytelling in the following ways: It allows to extend time in showing the details and atmosphere of the scenes; The actors can act as long as they need and take time to convey the emotion; And last but not least, this allows filmmakers to surprise the audience by challenging their expectations and habitual knowledge of plot conventions. Viewers don't expect a certain plot point or resolution at a specific time and place in the episode — something, which Miller notes experienced viewers know very well and predict what's going to happen next.²²⁰

Finally, the third condition concerns the general openness of *Hulu* to the concept of the show, in which Miller wanted to “push quite far”²²¹ in explicating the horrors of the Atwood's dystopia. It is an extremely bleak depiction of a religious totalitarian regime with extensive demonstration of torture, rape and psychological abuse. In addition to being distressing enough as they are, these themes are additionally amplified in presentation through narrative and aesthetic techniques that immerse the viewer into a state of acute sensitivity and empathy. In the following sections, we will introduce the details of the premise, plot and story of the show and discuss the scale and presentation of distressing subjects throughout two seasons of its run.

In general, it should be noted that the *Hulu* series borrows profoundly from the literary source and covers the original story completely with the exception of the epilogue, also moving beyond the scope of the novel starting with the second season. It features the characters and events featured in the book, however significantly expanding those storylines to fit the potentially long-running show. Thus, the characters only briefly mentioned in the original gain a more solid presence and development in the series and some new figures are introduced as well. Accordingly, the adaptation also expands the number of plot lines, conflicts and character arcs, as well as the overall scope of the fictional universe. The main cast of the characters in the series includes:

The protagonist June Osborne/Offred (Elisabeth Moss)

Commander Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes)

Serena Joy Waterford (Yvonne Strahovski)

Nick Blaine, a driver in the Waterford's household (Max Minghella)

Rita, a housemaid in the Waterford's household (Amanda Brugel)

Emily/Ofglen #1, June's shopping companion (Alexis Bledel)

²²⁰ Recode Staff, “Full transcript: ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode”.

²²¹ *ibid.*

Janine, a Handmaid and June's friend (Madeline Brewer)

Aunt Lydia, head of Rachel and Leah Center (Ann Dowd)

Moirra, June's best friend (Samira Wiley)

Luke Bankole, June's husband (O-T Fagbenle)

Hannah Bankole, daughter of June and Luke (Jordana Blake)

4.1 Season one (2017)

The first season consists of ten episodes. It introduces the premise of the story and the main character June Osborne/Offred who is held prisoner in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead. Like other Handmaids, Offred is regarded by the state as a property and is used for the execution of the single female function the ruling class is interested in, i.e. producing children. Denied any rights and freedoms, the woman is practically enslaved, her existence fully dependent on and controlled by the regime that regards women as an unworthy underclass. With the premise identical to that of the novel, the main focus of the first season lies in depicting the mental weight of living in captivity and the deep misery of Offred's victimhood which manifests in the everyday humiliation, precariousness, and the struggle to survive.

The narration is set in Boston which is now one of the territories occupied by Gilead. It is unknown what year it is or when the revolution had happened. The series begins soon after June is transferred to the household of the Gileadean Commander Fred Waterford and his wife Serena Joy, and it is being vaguely indicated that it must have been approximately a year since June has been captured. Through numerous flashbacks we get to know about her backstory, her friendships and family, her life before the fall of democracy and then afterwards, as she was separated from her husband and daughter and put into the re-education center for fertile women who are considered sinners by the standards of Gilead for being homosexual, divorced or unmarried mothers. June was likely captured for being married to a divorced man, although it is never said so explicitly.

The facility called the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, or the Red Center is led by the fanatical believer Aunt Lydia who teaches the captives the Gileadean ideology, instills radical religious beliefs and maintains discipline by public victim shaming, physical torture and mutilation. The penalties include foot whipping, blinding, genital mutilation, burning, stoning, isolation, starvation, and the most frequent punishment — electrocution with cattle prods. The

above methods are not only extremely brutal but also are usually applied to minor misdemeanors: the women can lose extremities or their eyes for merely not sitting straight or for smirking at a teacher. Also, the punishment may come unexpectedly and at any time. The unpredictability and force of it demand from the students utmost restraint — one is most safe when one doesn't speak up unless spoken to, doesn't act at one's own will, and doesn't think unless in prayers. In this way, the system re-educates women into being disassociated and compliant servants with no agendas of their own. In these heinous circumstances, the women whom Aunt Lydia lovingly calls "sweet girls" are prepared for the noble role of Handmaids, a mission that is the only way to atone for the sins of flesh from their past.

Meanwhile, in the current progressive timeline we are introduced to the life of a Handmaid after leaving the Red Center. Offred spends days in her empty room where she has nothing to do, as she isn't allowed to read, write, listen to music, or help around the house. Also there being no television or radio, her room and the whole house are always quiet and dormant.

Every now and then, Offred is being taken to a gathering with Handmaids such as for a birthing ceremony or a public execution. Often she goes to a grocery shop, albeit never alone — Handmaids may walk only in pairs; Their companionship, however, is regulated and closely observed, so that they can't converse freely or choose the walking routes other than those permitted. And once a month, "The Ceremony" takes place, which is the ideological climax of the Gileaden mission to resolve the fertility crisis. The ceremony starts with the Commander reading a passage from the Bible about the story of Rachel and Jacob and their handmaids, praying for a successful conception. Afterwards, the Handmaid must lie on the bed, her arms held by the Wife sitting behind her, all that while the Commander is having an act of sexual intercourse with the Handmaid. The position of the three people involved should symbolize them being of "one flesh" and the fact that they all remain almost fully clothed ensures a dispassionate process — sex in Gilead may be practiced for the sole purpose of conceiving children, even between married couples.

The main storyline is set against Offred's mission to conceive a baby. Having been a Handmaid for a while with no success in this regard, her time at the Waterfords' house is running out, and after several unfruitful postings a Handmaid is to be disposed of. Handmaids are punished for not getting pregnant, even when many know that the Commanders are mostly sterile. As a way to resolve the issue, Serena arranges that Offred has an intercourse with their driver Nick. With him being a sympathetic character who genuinely helps Offred on

many occasions, this develops into a secret romantic relationship that gives Offred — albeit a temporary — empowerment and helps her cope with the harrowing existence in Gilead.

At the same time, Commander Fred gets an interest in Offred. He takes her to secret and forbidden dates, which she has no right to decline. As he takes Offred to a hotel called Jezebels, it is being revealed that the men in higher ranks do after all indulge in pleasures of the flesh. There, Offred meets her best friend Moira who was put there after an attempt to escape, and after a while she runs from Jezebels too, getting asylum in Canada. Moira is an important character who serves as a moral support and source of courage for June, and inspires hope for the Handmaids that it is possible to flee Gilead.

Another important character is Offred's first shopping companion Ofglen (Emily) who confides to her about an active resistance group called Mayday, and encourages her to help. Soon after this conversation she disappears and a new Ofglen takes her place. Toward the end of the season Offred gets pregnant — it is clear that the father is Nick, but this child belongs to the Waterfords and as soon as it won't need to be breastfed, Offred will be sent off to a new posting with a new family.

In the last episode of the season, the Handmaids are gathered for a public execution. This time, they are asked to stone a Handmaid (Janine) to death. In contrast to Offred and many other Handmaids, Janine has been psychologically broken by the system, is unstable and occasionally delusional. After giving birth to a Commander's baby and being separated from it, she steals it and tries to jump off a bridge so that they both don't have to live in Gilead anymore. Her death sentence has accordingly been delegated to other Handmaids as a lesson. Offred disobeys and other Handmaids, emboldened by her, do the same. For Aunt Lydia this is the first time that her order has not been followed through.

Later that day, a black van comes to the house of the Waterfords. Just as in the novel, several armed men take Offred and lead her out of the house, while she does not know whether they are from the Gilead police or Mayday. She might be taken out by Nick's connections to the resistance group or meet her final punishment for the disobedience. Offred gets into the van while the voiceover quotes the last lines in the novel: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing. I've given myself over into the hands of strangers" (1x10, 57:55).

4.2 Season two (2018)

The second season consists of thirteen episodes. In contrast to the first, it dedicates more time to storylines of characters other than Offred/June. It expands the focus on Serena, showing her in the past and present, as she prepares for the birth of the child, on Luke and Moira living as refugees in Canada, and shows the colonies where women work to death mining toxic waste.

The narration picks up where the first season and the novel ended. The van brings Offred to an execution site where she and other Handmaids who refused to throw a stone at Janine undergo a series of punishments. Then, Aunt Lydia gets informed that Offred is pregnant and allows her to skip the physical penalty while orchestrating a psychological one: the Aunt forces Offred to eat in front on the Handmaids who are standing in line next to a torture room, thus underscoring Offred's guilt and alienating her friends who all get punished except for her. Soon after that, Offred is taken to a doctor's office where she is given a key to a door leading her out of the hospital to an underground road — thus an organized escape takes her from one hiding place to another, overall for 92 days and two and a half episodes. Finally, she reaches an airfield where a pilot is waiting to take her to Canada. But as the plane starts, they are getting ambushed by soldiers who bring Offred back to Gilead.

Although the government knows that Offred's escape was organized by Mayday, the official propaganda hides the fact that people want to flee Gilead and manage to do so, instead covering up the stories of those who disappear with alternative facts. The failed escape of Offred is explained as an abduction by a terrorist group and is used once again to demonstrate the power of Gilead no one can escape from.

As per Aunt Lydia's order, pregnant Offred is put into a solitary confinement in the Red Center, where she stays chained to a bed and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Polishing the effect of the treatment, Aunt Lydia uses further methods of psychological torture to prevent future acts of disobedience. Eventually, Offred breaks, begs for forgiveness and is allowed to live with the Waterfords until the baby comes. Meanwhile, so as to cut off moral support from the only source Offred has, Nick is forced to marry. Thus, his new wife named Eden who is 14 years old enters the Waterford's household as a new maid and help to Rita.

Later, at a gathering of Gileadean politicians one of the Handmaids activates a bomb which kills and wounds many Commanders and other Handmaids. After that, apparently because of the receded number of fertile women, Emily and Janine are brought back from the Colonies and assigned to new homes. Emily becomes the Handmaid of Commander Lawrence — a

new recurring character who is presented as the architect of Gilead's economy, an eccentric personality who ignores Gileaden rules of conduct and skips the Ceremonies.

The recent terrorist attack gives Gilead a reason to plea for recognition from the international community and one episode follows the Waterfords' trip to Canada for the talks with the Prime Minister. Luke and Moira attend a public protest facing June's abusers. As a help to the resistance, Nick smuggles secret documents that damage the image of Gilead, while Waterfords work on presenting their revolutionary regime as noble and effective in solving humanitarian crises. After the trip, Nick gives June the good news that Luke and Moira are alive and safe.

Meanwhile, after a short spell of peace with the Waterfords, Offred gets into labour, and all the Wives of Commanders gather for a Birthing Ceremony. The labour turns out to be false. Humiliated, Serena decides to induce labour physically by an unplanned Ceremony, which leads to a wicked scene of rape of pregnant Offred. Soon, she gives birth to a girl whom she names Holly. The Waterfords take the baby and send Offred away, while she has to pump milk in detachment from her newborn daughter. However, as the milk grows sparse for not seeing the baby, Offred is reluctantly allowed back home.

In the meantime, Nick's young wife Eden falls in love and runs away with a Guardian, they get caught and killed at a public execution. In the final episode, Offred finds a Bible among Eden's belongings, which testifies to her desire to follow the true word of God. It turns out, Eden's father informed the police about her daughter's location. The fact sparks a conversation among the Wives of Commanders who are now alarmed that their daughters will not be protected when they grow up. Serena pleads in front of the male council to allow literacy for girls in order to be able to read the Bible, and herself reads one passage aloud. This appeal is denied and Serena gets punished for reading by having a finger cut off. This breaks her spirit and persuades that Holly indeed will not be safe in Gilead.

In the last quarter of the episode, two plot lines are developing in a parallel action. In the first, Commander Lawrence helps Emily to escape to Canada and in the second, Rita and other Marthas have arranged a diversion, which allows June to flee together with Holly. In the final scene, approaching the car where Emily is waiting, June realizes that she can't save one of her daughters, leaving Hannah behind in Gilead. She gives the baby to Emily and wishes them both a safe journey to Canada. As the car is driving away toward freedom, June stands still composing herself until she slowly lifts her gaze straight into the camera and her face

expression turns to determination and anger, thus foreshadowing that her story will continue with a rescue mission.

4.3 Narrative and dramatic structure of the *Hulu* adaptation

As seen from the overview of the first two seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale*, they quite differ in the dynamic and the number of plot lines, however still maintaining the focus on the character of June/Offred and on dramatic style and scope of violence established in the first season. In this section we will discuss the noteworthy characteristics of the structure and general storytelling strategies pertaining to the series.

First and foremost, the *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale* clearly belongs in the genre of a drama, thriller and dystopia. It is made in the format of the one-hour serial, although its narrative structure is based on the combination of a serial and episodic format. This complex form of narration uses both the open-ended and self-contained forms of the serialized storytelling, in which some plot lines continue from one episode to another and some plots are introduced and resolved within the single episode.

The first season is distinctly more focused on the plot of the novel than the second one, and is concentrated heavily and almost exclusively on the character of June/Offred. It takes much interest in the backstory of June before becoming Offred, and a lot of the screen time is dedicated to the past shown in flashbacks. In the second season, the narration is more preoccupied with the forward progress of Offred's life during the escape, pregnancy, and giving birth. The second season reveals other characters more fully, giving them their own plot lines and dramatic arcs.

The majority of the episodes in the first season have on the average two plot threads (A, B). The A thread is usually the main story showing the journey of the lead character Offred/June in the present. The B thread is often a storyline of June's memories shown in flashbacks. Thus, the dramatic development of the season is almost completely carried out by the protagonist alone, which proves her to be the driving lead of the series. For example, in episode 1x01, plot A concerns Offred's day of the first Ceremony with the Waterfords, and plot B shows her past in flashbacks. In 1x02, plot A shows the day of the Birthing Ceremony of Janine as all the Handmaids and Wives are gathered in one house, and plot B shows in retrospect the time after June gave birth to Hannah. This way, one episode often revolves around the protagonist's narrative arc, whereas different timelines create a kind of parallel

action. Especially in the beginning, this structure has an explanatory function as it introduces through the flashbacks important facts about the nature of Gilead and some characters who are important for the story however absent from the current timeline.

In season two, plot B often becomes concerned with some other character, such as Luke, Moira, Emily and the Waterfords. The number of Offred's flashbacks somewhat recedes in comparison to the first season, and toward the end of the season the number of plot threads increases up to four. Here, one episode may include parallel action or flashbacks of other characters, however never all of them in one episode. Nevertheless, the narration still underscores the focal role of Offred/June and has her perspective as the main priority.

It is noteworthy that the structure of the episodes themselves is not quite homogeneous. The storytelling strategies of the series are distinguished by subtle techniques of placing plot points, conflicts, actions and reactions in diverse and unpredictable ways. The act structure is followed here quite loosely with less concern for the precise timing of the commercials than for maintaining the flow of the story, which pertains to a novelistic style and character-driven narration. As we already briefly mentioned, this has much to do with the absence of the specific running time of the episodes. Commenting on freedom from formal constrictions, Miller says:

“I think you can fool people into not knowing which of the storylines is going to end up being the most important at the end of the episode... I don't want to be able to track the story from A, to B, to C, to D. It doesn't feel as real. It's much more predictable, and also I find that your goal is to get to an end that feels inevitable yet absolutely unpredictable.”²²²

Discussing the subject more specifically, not all the episodes of the two seasons contain the conventional elements such as the inciting incident, rising action, complication, climax, and cliffhanger, and not all of them in that order. For instance, the episode 1x04 consists of two plot threads: thread A continues the plot line that commenced in the previous episode: Offred is punished and is still not allowed to leave her room, which has been thirteen days. Dispirited, unnerved and having lost the sense of time, she is living in isolation with nothing to do. She finds refuge in her cloakroom, where she spots a phrase written on the wall by the previous Handmaid, which makes her feel less lonely. Later, when the Commander invites her to play Scrabble in his study, she finds out the meaning of the sentence: “Don't let the bastards grind you down” written in fake Latin. This slogan from the former inhabitant of Offred's room

²²² Recode Staff, “Full transcript: ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode”.

gives her strength and hope, as it seems like a sign of a communal spirit from other Handmaids. In these limited circumstances, even such a small revelation has a powerful emotional effect but this storyline is distinctly plain in terms of the development of the further action. It does not advance plot and rather seeks to dwell purely on the atmosphere and character of Offred who is doing soul-searching and inadvertently develops new coping mechanisms in the little microcosm of her confined and passive existence.

In the parallel thread, plot B consists of the flashbacks telling the story of how June and Moira tried to flee the Red Center. This plot, in contrast, has a progressive and dynamic structure in five acts: In the set-up, Moira plans an escape; in the escalation, they both fight an Aunt and run away; in the complication, June has to distract a police officer so that he doesn't see Moira who just boarded the train; in the climax, June is being led away to the torture room and in the resolution, other handmaids come to June's bed and give her smuggled rests of the food as a sign of support. Thus, only one of the two plot threads in this example has a conventional act structure and interestingly, the main one that concerns the progressing timeline is a purely atmospheric one. As a whole, the episode doesn't bring the story forward and doesn't show new nuances of life in Gilead, however it develops the viewer's understanding of the character, forces immersion into the atmosphere she lives in, gives access to her thoughts and feelings, and reinforces the emotional engagement by the ample time we spend with her. This is one of the fundamental storytelling strategies of the adaptation in general, one that is focused on the demonstration of the character's mental state, following her thought process, and inner struggle to stay sane and alive.

One other important feature of the dramatic writing of the series is its idiosyncratic emotional plane where small-scale events act like or lead to powerful emotional cues. The latter concerns the absurdly violent acts of punishment for insignificant actions, as was briefly mentioned in the section 4.1. And the former concerns the fact that Offred, as a prisoner, has a value system different from that of a free person. In this system, that which is simple, mundane, or small-scale becomes important, meaningful and affective. Thus, the structural elements which denote character's moments of victory, or high points, are often conveyed through the contrast between the meaningful and insignificant. As in the above example, the simple existence of the writing on the wall serves as an emotional high for Offred and as a positive culmination of the whole episode, albeit it doesn't affect the plot of the series or its further developments.

Another prominent case of such high moment occurs in the episode 2x07 where Offred and other Handmaids exchange their real names for the first time (44:48-47:05). The scene shows the comeback of Emily and Janine and their meeting with other Handmaids at a store. Realizing the imposed anonymity behind their friendships the women cautiously and quietly say their real names to each other, as if seeing each other for the first time. The act of exchanging names is filmed in slow motion and lasts for two minutes, savoring the inspiration of empowerment and human connection. The scene is unmistakably constructed as a gratification for the viewer who rarely sees Handmaids resist against the oppression. In a sense, this is a great victory for the women who stepped up to their existence independent from ideology. At the same time the scene is narratively redundant and not functional in the sense of bringing the story forward. It doesn't develop into an advancing plot line of further successful acts of resistance, and is outweighed by the next acts of oppression coming at Offred after that. Remarkably, this strategy is maintained throughout the series, especially in the first season: the high points for June are not only rare and narratively insubstantial, they also don't drive the story forward. This is an important feature of the show as it allows to maintain the viewer's focus on the character of the protagonist and her daily afflictions and also underscore the ongoing deprivation of her existence.

Overall, it can be concluded that the formal structure of the *Hulu* adaptation pertains more to the mode of a character-driven story rather than plot-driven. On many occasions the narration is predominantly focused on the exploration of emotion of Offred, which renders the actual development of the plot only secondary to the character's inner life.

4.3 The foundation of empathy in the exposition of the series, episode "Offred"

The exposition of the plot provided in the very first episode is a distinctive structural part of any television series. It has the function of setting up the premise, provide information about the characters, time, place, and the main idea of the story while also arousing interest in the audience. For this study, the analysis of "Offred" — the opening episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* — is important because it illuminates the internal rules of storytelling and the strategy of involving the viewer emotionally in the premise of the story and the main character's persona. As the subsequent chapters will deal with separate storytelling strategies, in this subsection we will see them in their entirety.

From the very beginning of the series, we are taken through the multiple layers of temporal shifts swiveling between several timelines in the past and the diegetic present. The first layer includes the cut-backs to June's life before the political overthrow, the second are the flashbacks to the propaganda-led learning course at the Red Center.

The first episode opens with a wide aerial shot of a wintry country landscape. On an empty road a car is speeding away to the loud off-screen sound of police sirens. The family inside the car is what we will find out to be the protagonist, her husband Luke and daughter Hannah. The icy road makes a turn, the car slips off to the side and gets stuck. As the tires swirl trying to back up the car and failing, the atonal pitch-shifting score engulfs the scene with growing tension. Luke urges the two to head into the forest where the Canadian border is only two miles away.

The mother and daughter run, the camera follows them from the distance. It is quiet until the sirens and men's voices are heard again, and two shots fired. The woman stops, camera close on her startled face; the image pulls in and out of focus mirroring the shock of the protagonist — her husband must have just been killed. She takes the girl in her hands and runs faster, the quivering hand-held camera stays close on their faces. They almost manage to remain unseen. Then the woman's point-of-view shot catches a glimpse of male hands with rifles, hands that are taking her little daughter away. The motion slows down, the camera stays with a close-up on her face spotlighting the terror, prolonging the defining moment that splits her life into before and after. An unseen hand hits the woman on the head and she, half-conscious, is dragged into a van, its doors close to a pitch black screen. The scene lasts 4:50 minutes and has almost no spoken lines. The combination of the long duration of the sequence, the realistic acting and cinematography, and the threatening diegetic sound communicate anguish and terror, very likely inducing an experience of emotional contagion in the audience. Although we are seeing the characters for the first time, it is quite obvious that they are rightfully running away from something terrifying. At this point, this intuitive knowledge is enough to naturally pick up the feel of the gravity of the situation and respond congruently to the rhythm and amplified fear of the chase.

After the opening sequence roughly outlined the backstory and invited the viewer to sympathize with the character who lost her family, the next scene sets up the mood and the overall style of the series where the visual language and off-screen voice prevail over action and the on-screen dialogue. We see a dim bedroom with a female figure sitting on the windowsill, her face made invisible by the lack of light. The still posture will be maintained

for one full minute and the only source of movement will be that of a tracking zoom of the camera that is getting progressively close to the face of the woman. The audience are given abundant time to absorb the ambiance of the space that has a painting-like quality: The minimal setting of walls and the window is activated by a performative interplay of natural illumination from the window. The sunshine seems to pierce the woman's body and travel through her, breaking off in the long contrasting shadows. The light reaches the middle of the room in diagonal lines, which aesthetically interacts with the wide horizontal orientation of the setting. The visual style communicates what the screenwriters described as an "otherworldly tableau".²²³ Indeed, the light around the woman invokes a spiritual imagery as that of a martyr or a saint, and also literally gives her prominence as of the main character in the film.

The statue-like figure unhurriedly comes into definition as the non-diegetic female voice breaks the silence. With no hurry to explain the premise, the woman starts her narration by describing the furniture in the room: "A chair, a table, a lamp. There's a window with white curtains" (04:50). This is a welcoming nod to the audience familiar with the novel since the screen version of *Offred* almost quotes the lines in the book.

The space on screen is meanwhile filled with contradictory and contrasting visual cues: Dramatic chiaroscuro light glows in the peaceful and orderly surrounding, yet its source comes through the shatterproof glass in a window that can't be opened completely. The room is tidy and almost cozy, but its edges are soaked in darkness and seem to never be touched by the light. The woman's composed posture and tender voice are juxtaposed with the fact that she is trying not to think about ways to commit a suicide in the room where such is anticipated and forestalled: "It isn't running away that they're afraid of. Handmaid wouldn't get far. It's these other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself...giving a cutting edge, or a twisted sheet, a chandelier" (05:06-05:20).

The camera doesn't pan anymore, and now being close to the woman, we look directly at her plain face with no make-up, a white bonnet on her head. She is dressed in a crimson robe that looks like an everyday outfit. "My name is Offred", the voice says finally, the woman still motionless and silent, "I had another name, but it's forbidden now. So many things are forbidden now" (05:47). The voice stops, the scene closes. This way, the introduction of the main character has been completed, albeit not having exposed much factual context. Rather

²²³ Ilene Chaiken, "The Handmaid's Tale Pilot", Writer's Draft, 29.11.2015, www.scriptsbug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/the-handmaids-tale-1x01-offred-2017.pdf, p. 6.

contrary to the opening, this scene sets up the mood more than it reveals an information, the visual style and quite a mysterious atmosphere seek to provide the audience with a sensory-aesthetic experience, without yet engaging into the narrative comprehension of what is being shown.

Starting with the next scene, we are introduced to the unhurried daily routine of Offred on the day which is revealed to be the day of the Ceremony — an unexplained event that is a hook for the audience to keep watching based on suspense and a menacing expectation of a ritual that, considering the beginning of the film, is most likely to be something heinous. By mentioning the Ceremony at the very beginning, therefore, everything in the episode leading up to the end is set to build up the growing tension in the viewer, gradually, by introducing more and more details of the backstory prior to the present day where Offred is.

The third scene shows us a flashback to Offred's arrival in the household of the Commander Fred Waterford and his wife Serena Joy. Played in 2017 by then 47 year-old Joseph Fiennes and 34 year-old Yvonne Strahovski, while Moss was 35, they are much younger than the couple in the novel — a casting decision made in favor of counterpointing the ideological and moral antagonism between the Waterfords and June: Despite them all belonging to the same generation and having lived with equal rights, freedoms and opportunities, in the blink of an eye an educated, intelligent, talented woman becomes an enemy of those who feel threatened by female power and independence. The Waterfords personify the elitist vice and sense of entitlement to the lives of others when they find justification for getting what they can not have — children. Therefore, all the following interactions between the Waterfords and Offred are naturally filled with tension and dramatic charge: the underlying conflict of every scene is the unfairness of treating Offred inhumanely because she is a better person than the Commander and his wife are.

At the cinematic level, the antithesis between the Handmaid and her masters is highlighted from the very beginning as the *mise-en-scène* places Serena and Offred in the living room at a long distance from each other. Serena is captured in a medium shot standing tall and dignified while Offred sits humbly on a sofa, her face and wings of the bonnet occupy in close-up the whole space of the screen. Subsequently, in the shot-reverse-shot the camera maintains the master-servant opposition showing Mrs. Waterford looking down on Offred and Offred only rarely daring to look up while half of her face stays hidden under the bonnet.

During the conversation in which most talking is done by Serena, the camera nevertheless stays longer on the face of Offred. Their dialogue is built upon a Gileadean conversational

code with the greeting “Blessed be the fruit” and the answer “Praise be to you. May the Lord open”. Mrs. Waterford greets Offred formally and politely says that she is pleased that Offred knows the rules of conduct as a Handmaid. “Our last one was brand new”, she says in a casual, almost friendly voice, “It was like training a dog, only not a smart one” (06:10-06:20), she concludes with a slight irritation. Startled, but suppressing display of emotion, Offred lowers her eyes and doesn’t respond; this moment points out for her as well as for the audience the wicked morals of the people she came to live with. An inhumane attitude toward Handmaids uttered in such a nonchalant way also alludes to a psychopathic mentality of the governing class of Gilead who show no remorse, empathy and compassion for the majority of the people under their rule; with the aim of acquiring babies for the state, the means to do that are not subject to any scruples and display of social conscience.

After the conversation ends and Serena leaves, the camera stays with Offred. In silence, she clenches her fist, her sight is rather absent and defocused as her mind comes to grips with the reality of a posting at a new home. The silent, non-narrative bit shown in close-up marks the end of the scene and transitions to the next, which is yet another silent close-up shot set back in the bedroom (8:15). Up to this point, we have been given mostly emotional and visual cues rather than informational ones and spent almost ten minutes physically close to the protagonist — an introduction that forces us to immerse in the space inhabited by Offred, especially in the emotional landscape that she finds herself in. The definitive tendency to show rather than tell is, therefore, established early on and will continue throughout the whole series.

The fourth scene follows Offred as she makes her way around the house to the kitchen where she receives tokens used in Gilead to purchase goods amid the shortage of food and other supplies. Like in the previous prolonged shots of Moss’s face, also here a simple action such as walking to another room is amplified in presentation through an extended amount of time: it takes two and a half minutes to complete the walking sequence (8:10-10:30), during which only four short lines of dialogue are uttered. Instead, the time is taken to show the atmosphere of the house: Offred’s hand runs along the dark wooden banisters of the staircase in the hallway; in the kitchen, the housemaid Rita is kneading dough, and the camera lingers on the masses of flour as it is scattered in the air in slow motion before touching the surface of the table, shining in the golden light from the window. Offred silently stands in the entrance reveling in the sight of a simple and beautiful routine. At the same time, her voiceover remarks that homemade bread is one of the manifestations of the Gileadean ideology: “A

return to traditional values, that's what they fought for" (8:54). Immediately, the enticing scene gains in dark undertone; it is a characteristic feature of the show's narration that creates an antithesis between appearance and substance. What seems to be an effortless practice of creating comfort and nourishment turns out to be an act of complying with political propaganda. Even one's kitchen is a place regulated by law, and one's home is an occupied territory too. The house itself, as is understood between the lines, was stolen from the past owners in the course of the revolution. This implication is a permanently active emotional cue — as the main set location in the series, the house is always there to underscore the evil essence of the Gileadean and Waterford's character which is masterfully hidden behind the tasteful and elegant furnishing of the facade.

Gradually, everything that Offred comes across turns out to be as beautiful and orderly on the outside as it is wicked under the surface. The streets are perfectly clean and surrounded by beautiful houses, yet on every corner there is a guardian holding a rifle, watching every step of those who pass by. A wide shot reveals a nice landscape with a river glittering in the sun, yet on its bank is a wall on which hang the corpses of "gender traitors" and scientists.

As Offred walks out of the house, she passes driver Nick who talks to her jokingly and informally, which is evidently against the rules — the fact that disturbs Offred even more than a show of contempt would be. Is he a friend or an "Eye", a spy for the secret police working under cover to compromise the Handmaid? Behind the gate she joins her shopping partner Ofglen, to whom she speaks sparsely and cautiously — one never knows what beliefs are hiding behind the formal utterances of others and Offred wonders whether their small talk is an attempt to catch her on forbidden thoughts. Just as the neat design of the houses, streets, and wardrobe conceals the dark core of Gilead, so does the regulated speech suppress the freedom of expression. Each following scene increasingly exposes people's distrust of each other and the impossibility to speak one's mind. Everything one says can and will be used against them.

In this setting, the audience is provided the orientation in the world of Gilead, entirely through the perspective of Offred. There is not a scene where Offred's character is not present. The camera continuously stays close to the Handmaid not ever leaving her side, permitting the sense of familiarity to develop. But the moment when the viewer is given the first strong cue for identification and empathy happens at minute fourteen in the scene at the grocery shop. Leading up to this, we have seen a vague presentation of a woman's life in an unknown society. Offred has quietly participated and observed. It all is a routine, which we, however,

do not yet know how to evaluate in the context of this story. When Offred enters the store — a sterile-white building rather reminding a hospital — she meets other Handmaids. As they exchange Gileadean greetings (“Under his eye”) and talk in formal observations aware of being watched by numerous armed guardians, the atmosphere gains in eeriness. In the setting of accumulating strangeness and dread, Offred is ushered to buy oranges — a rare luxury that other girls are excited about; Offred, on the contrary, is not in the mood to be happy about that. Slowly, almost unwillingly, she reaches for the fruit while the voiceover expresses her thoughts in the moment: “I don’t need oranges”, she thinks; her voice filled with contempt, “I need to scream. I need to grab the nearest machine-gun” (from 14:55).

This is the first time the viewer receives an indication that what we see is definitely not normal, that Offred is indeed in conflict with the role she is forced to perform. It is a clue about the trajectory of the desire of the protagonist which is to not be in the society that surrounds her. Understanding the contextual situation and the protagonist’s attitude toward it gives us a frame of reference for building a positive disposition toward her and share her goals and concerns. It is also an encouragement for the audience to apprehend Offred’s predicaments with the same moral judgement we have for dealing with good and evil in real life, to be on the same side as Offred and together with her be against the Gileadean regime. The fact that she stays calm on the outside also calls for our allegiance, because it shows Offred as savvy, composed and careful, only little hints of Moss’s facial expression and body language give away her irritation and anger.

From here, the horrors of Gilead become more and more explicit, and more engaging, because we have established a connection with the protagonist and her personal perspective. Subsequently, the events happening to Offred demand more of affective and cognitive involvement as the narration builds up the contextual orientation and cues progressively stronger emotions. The next flashback (starting 16:02) takes us to a classroom, where the teacher — a woman dressed in a brown uniform of “Aunts” — presents a lecture on the values of Gilead. According to her, the infertility crisis is the rightful punishment of God for industrial pollution and emancipation of Americans. The women sitting at the desks, however, are lucky and privileged — they were chosen by God to bear children for the leaders of the faith. Offred, who has just been led into the room, still wearing jeans and a T-shirt, finds out why she was taken prisoner. A new Handmaid beside her smirks, at which Aunt Lydia reacts with a warm smile and a stroke of a taser baton. As a lesson for all the Handmaids and demonstration of power, the Aunts pluck Janine’s eye out. Although Handmaids are the hope

and the most valuable asset of Gilead, their well-being is not a priority. “You are a breeding stock, you don’t need eyes for that” (22:02), says Offred’s friend Moira, at which point the story establishes awareness of an acute physical danger the protagonist is in. This sets up the process of conditioning which calls for an emotional response from the viewer at the coming moments of character’s non-compliance with the Gileadean regime.

The cultivation of dread continues as Offred, back in the present timeline, comes home to prepare for the announced Ceremony. The suspenseful writing has not disclosed what the ritual is going to be, but the gradual revelation of a Handmaid’s role in Gilead has fed the viewer’s imagination. The following scene of the Ceremony presents a crucial plot point for the first episode: It culminates the built-up suspense and the sense of threat, revealing the central conflict and tragedy of the series. The scene runs five and a half minutes (28:05-33:40), focusing on the silent and restrained Offred, as the proximity to her expressionless face on the screen becomes highly uncomfortable.

The combination of acting, directing and cinematography establishes an exceptionally eerie ambiance of the proceeding that conveys perversity through the sadistic and authorized ritual that neither of the party enjoys. During the extremely long takes showing in close-up Offred’s face as she is waiting and then lying on the bed, the camera addresses the viewer’s capacity for identification, perspective-taking and empathy: does one keep watching or look away? The obvious intention of the show’s creators is the first option, the image does strive to own and hold the viewer’s gaze. The camera hypnotizes through the extremely slow motion and almost hyperrealistic visual style; The raw and minimalistic ambiance of the scene spotlights the only acting element on the screen which is the woman’s face — expressionless and willfully restrained. The long close-up shot together with the decelerated temporal flow articulates Offred’s psychic state of disassociation and endurance. The camera takes generous time to let a large spectrum of revulsion pour over the audience and enable the viewer’s allegiance to attach to the protagonist. Through the emotional and immersive presentation, the scene creates a situation of witnessing a live act of violence, which calls for empathy through the bias of salience and proximity. For some viewers, of course, this may also trigger the bias of familiarity and past experience and elicit an especially traumatic effect.

Taking all this into consideration, this is a textbook scene of empathy — one where a face maintains the focus of attention in order to communicate emotion instead of information and elicit a congruent emotional response from the viewer. The scene initiates an extremely intimate and dramatic encounter with the protagonist, forcing the viewer to look in her eyes

for the duration of the act of the formalized rape. The profound dread and distress of the scene might raise aversion in some viewers, however not toward the protagonist, because she, although traumatized, stays strong and unbroken. Thus, the audience is becoming progressively more understanding and sympathetic of Offred and her positive qualities give the reason to approve of her character, take interest in her personality, and be curious as to how her inner strength will affect her life under the oppressive regime.

At the end of the episode, Offred implicitly acknowledges the presence of the audience and in the voice-over tells us how she manages to stay sane in the circumstances of her life: it is the memory of her husband and the fact that her daughter Hannah is there in Gilead, which means she hopes to see her again. “My name is June and I intend to survive”, she affirms during the extreme close-up shot (55:50). This way, only in the last minute of the episode do we find out the character’s motivation, intention, and, as we will see later, also the main obstacle to June’s escaping Gilead. Besides, the revealed name plays an important role in the series: while in the book the namelessness of the victim manifests her lost identity and subdued power, in the series, owning one’s own name is a sign of self-preservation and an act of inner resistance. As soon as June says her name in the closing scene, she reconnects to the strength and integrity and gives a sign for the audience that she will fight against the regime that is trying to erase her personality.

Overall, the episode of fifty-five-minutes has featured twenty two scenes. Of them, twelve have extremely little to no on-screen dialogue. Half of the scenes run one minute and less and are transitions in which Offred walks between different locations or flashbacks showing fragments of her memories. The other half of the scenes run two and more minutes, with the longest one lasting 7:50 minutes (40:22-48:11). With the scope of silence and slow pace of the story, there is a distinctive strategy to convey to the audience the atmosphere and emotional orientation of the given universe rather than entice us by scenes of action or events driving the plot further. The whole episode is dedicated to the past and present of the protagonist’s life, although it is the present moment that is being observed very closely and in the smallest detail. Therefore, the authors intend to engross the audience in the reality that June is living in, and establish the relationship of trust and intimacy with her in order to attune to her emotions. The latter is conveyed subtly but strongly through Moss’s acting, cinematic and narrational techniques that progressively expose the viewer to the inner life of the protagonist and allow the established character engagement to elicit congruent emotional states in the audience.

5. Narrative strategies of empathy in *The Handmaid's Tale*

This chapter groups together the empathy-inducing strategies with regard to the dramatic writing, narrative context and presentation of the plot, story, conflicts and characters in *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale*. The main focus here concerns the mode of narration and techniques that encourage viewer's positive affective disposition toward the character and the interest in her journey. At the same time, we look into the mechanisms that evoke viewer's empathy and hypothesize about the emotional impact it has on the audience.

First of all we should consider the overarching scale of emotion that *The Handmaid's Tale* operates on. In accordance with the dystopian genre, the series presents a nightmarish scenario that realizes the fundamental human fears, such as those concerned with survival and reproduction, freedom and justice, safety, and self-actualization. Literally all of that which gives comfort and sense of stability in a human life is being forcefully taken from the protagonist. In the act of becoming a slave to Gilead, June not only loses her constitutional rights but also the right to be considered a human being. The natural needs of her mind and body are ignored and controlled by an external authority and at many times this aspect is staged so to invoke direct resemblance of the Gilead's attitude toward Handmaids as toward machines or animals. Such premise innately aims at evoking an affective response and emotional participation from the audience because this is a demonstration of the universally shared fears. As we know, capacity for empathy correlates with the degree of familiarity, similarity and significance of the events for the character. Taking into account that *The Handmaid's Tale* is built upon events attacking the fundamental human values and needs, the show's focus on human oppression and physical abuse is a predisposition that invites viewer to empathize with the protagonist whose suffering we can understand and relate to.

More specifically, there are several predominant themes of oppression that are being explicitly imposed on the viewer through the predicaments of the protagonist. It is noteworthy that the series begins with the flashback scene of the failed attempt to flee. An image of a family being torn apart, and a mother forcefully separated from her child is an immediate and strong appeal to the most basic of parent's or child's fears. Notably, it is the point of view of the mother from which the audience sees Hannah being taken by the armed men, not the other way round. From the very start, the viewer is taken to the June's side, witnessing her dread that is most relatable for women who have or have had an experience of motherhood. Further in the

series, the many traumas of motherhood are explored and extended when June gets pregnant in Gilead and carries a baby that she knows will be taken from her.

In an internet discussion of the series on *Reddit*, many women describe how this theme takes toll on their emotions: “I cry multiple times per episode usually. I think the stuff that really gets to me is the children/moms separation situations. As a mom, I can’t imagine what that would do to me.”²²⁴ In another comment, a user says she stopped watching the show “because I had a newborn baby and the thought of someone taking my baby from me was so profoundly upsetting that I was having nightmares.”²²⁵ Notably, such reactions demonstrate that viewers absorb the content of the show through the prism of their own experience and apply those schemas to the process of feeling into the fiction. In the process of drawing parallels between themselves and the protagonist who lost her child, the female viewers thus project some of the reality onto the screen and try to imagine how they would feel in the same situation. The fact that many describe their experience as highly distressing and some can’t endure watching the series whatsoever, makes it possible to suggest that they succeed in achieving the state of emotional congruence with the protagonist.

Apart from that, there is an overarching theme that concerns universal human fears of a more general kind, such as the eradication of freedom, of hard-won human rights as well as of scientific achievements and cultural progress. Through the intimate insight into the life of Offred, the show invites the audience to vicariously experience how it feels to be a captive of a fundamentalist state that dehumanizes people and murders those who don’t fit into the very narrow and unethical set of principles. Thus, the audience is likely to get in touch with their own existential anxieties and come to contemplate about one’s place in the world and the meaning of life when one’s freedom has been taken away.

These are the main emotional anchors that build a core of the emotional engagement with the protagonist June/Offred which make it possible to build a relationship based on familiarity and similarity — especially for parents and those who are concerned with the questions of justice and human rights, who have an experience of oppression, abuse, and those who have understanding of universal human afflictions.

²²⁴ audigirl81, 8.06.2019, 00:58:37, *Reddit*, www.reddit.com/r/TheHandmaidsTale/comments/by0mun/no_spoilers_does_anyone_else_get_super_emotional/eqbe711/, 4.04.2020.

²²⁵ GalaxyGirl777, 8.06.2019, 1:07:02, *Reddit*, www.reddit.com/r/TheHandmaidsTale/comments/by0mun/no_spoilers_does_anyone_else_get_super_emotional/eqbe711/, 4.04.2020.

5.1 Character writing

As we have established, the narration of *The Handmaid's Tale* is driven by the figure of the protagonist June/Offred. Both the majority of plot threads and the time dedicated to showing her journey demonstrate the strongly pronounced role that the Moss's character plays in the series. Since the narration of *The Handmaid's Tale* is quite slow and very much focused on showing June's/Offred's mental states and delivering the atmosphere of Gilead, it is important to recognize how the depiction of the character works with the concept of empathy. In this section we will distinguish what empathy-inducing techniques of character writing are used in relation to the protagonist and why they encourage empathy in the viewer.

As discussed in the section 2.4, the predisposition to empathy is ingrained first and foremost in the personality of the fictional character. In order to establish the emotional connection with the viewer, the protagonist should be presented as realistic and likable, having clear goals and being consistent in her motivations and actions. The stronger the viewers come to like and care for the character, the easier it will be to catch her emotions and share them.

June Osborne is obviously a positive character and an "everywoman", a generalized version of a middle-class adult living today in a democratic society. In the flashbacks we see her as a loving friend, mother and wife. She has flaws and is not perfect, which makes her seem ordinary and realistic. She works as an associate editor at a small publishing house in Boston, takes yoga classes and goes out with friends for a coffee. Amid the rising tensions in the society, we see that she is not a hero or a fighter, but merely a concerned citizen and a busy mother who watches the news on television while taking care of her family. As a contrast to her middle-ground position serve the characters of her mother Holly and best friend Moira who are both activists taking part in protests and supporting feminist groups. June is someone who does care about justice and women's rights, but takes them for granted and would rather discuss these topics at a dinner table with a glass of wine rather than hold a protest sign at a political event. This is a portrait of a good-humored, non-contentious, non-radical, liberal person that has a natural likable quality and invites the wide audience to relate to her personality. These details of June's life before Gilead are shown in a few strokes, however they are so average and general that it is easy to get the impression of knowing exactly what June's life has been possibly by projecting our own experiences or expectations on her persona, thus "feeling into" her image. The background story of the protagonist gives access to her inner world, personality and origins, which strengthens the familiarity bias and the

capacity for empathy. These flashbacks also give the audience a kind of a mirror in which they can see themselves in the place of June, because her past bears strong similarities to our present.

The fact that June is a good person and doesn't deserve the suffering inflicted on her makes her a guiltless victim in the eyes of the liberally-minded audience; this makes her an easy object of sympathy which is crucial for development of empathy. Moreover, her character is also defined by virtues that contribute to her likability: despite the gravity of her situation and inability to actively enforce change, June nevertheless maintains integrity and morals. She helps Moira flee the Red Center sacrificing herself; Another time, she inspires courage in her best friend, which helps Moira escape Gilead for good. She refuses to stone Janine to death and always tries to help her out of the trouble. In all the ways, Offred/June is an antithesis to the governing class of Gilead and its supporters: she is a loving and kind person, she maintains the sense of right and wrong, values friendship and is compassionate toward those who suffer; she has conscience and is capable of guilt and remorse. By elevating the protagonist above her abusers, the narrative frames her as an ultimate martyr in a position one against the system, and places her in the center of a perpetual conflict between good and evil. Because of the unfair and brutal treatment of a positive character, the audience is naturally prone to sympathy and allegiance, and building on that grows the propensity to understand, catch, and mirror June's/Offred's emotional states.

5.2 Narrative perspective

As an extension of the subject of character writing in *The Handmaid's Tale* we should consider further narrative techniques that give a better understanding of the protagonist and strengthen the emotional bond with her by giving the audience an access to her subjective perspective, thoughts, emotional states, and mental processes. More specifically, this is achieved by the use of the first-person narration and the congruent state of narrational knowledge with Offred. Both are known to be the aspects of the narrative perspective — the point of view from which the story is told. As June is both the protagonist and the narrator of the story, she is also the main channel of information and emotion for the audience. This allows for the closer engagement of the viewer with the protagonist, and heightens the degree of familiarity and proximity, thus also affecting the correspondent empathy bias.

The affective power of the first-person perspective can be summed up through the account of Anne Ptereson who writes that “*The Handmaid’s Tale* quietly forces the audience into the position of the handmaid herself: To watch is to feel the daily realities, the sensations and smells, the invisible constrictions and silent aggressions of living under patriarchy.”²²⁶ One of the reasons that the viewer come to experience the sensation of presence or immersion in the fictional world is through the congruent state of narrational knowledge, which concerns the fact that our comprehension of the show’s diegesis is tied firmly to the perspective of the protagonist. This is evident especially in the first season, in which the little number of parallel action and plot lines of other characters makes us stay one on one with Offred most of the time. As most of the supporting characters appear only in the scenes with the protagonist, the audience is taken to perceive the events through Offred’s vantage point. When she returns from shopping and says goodbye to her companion Ofglen, the scene continues following the protagonist further into the rest of her day, while the routine of Ofglen remains unseen (e.g. 1x02, 6:25). We know of the lives of other Handmaids no more than Offred does, with only rare exceptions. Similarly, we usually don’t see Nick, Rita, Aunt Lydia, other Commanders and their wives when they don’t share a scene with Offred.

The narration therefore forces perspective-taking with June/Offred by denying the viewer to know more than she does and making the audience dependent on her for providing information. As an example serves the plot point in the episode 1x06 in which Offred learns that Luke is alive (52:40), which is a new information for the viewer as well. Before that, Luke was considered dead and had been shown only in flashbacks. After the sixth episode, however, he gains his own plot line in the series, in which we get to know about his escape from Gilead and arrival as a refugee in Canada. Although subsequently Offred remains unaware of the details we get to see, she was the catalyst of the new information for the audience.

Moreover, the limited perspective of the protagonist is manifested in withdrawal of much of the factual information from the story. Since June doesn’t mention it, we remain unaware of the year the story is unfolding in and many other facts and nuances of the Gileadean life and structure. At that, just as in the book, many of the features of the fictional world remain unknown. The narrative clearly doesn’t aim at painting a big picture of the Gileadean society, rather focusing on the individual experiences of the reality through the view point of one

²²⁶ Anne H. Peterson, “The Radical Feminist Aesthetic Of “The Handmaid’s Tale”, *Buzzfeed News*, 13.04.2017, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/blessed-be-the-fruit#.fm6w6plXm, 4.04.2020.

person who knows little about the world outside of the walls behind which she is being held. Through this narrational strategy, the audience is being put in similar psychological confines as a prisoner in Gilead, rendering a sense of a claustrophobic existence deprived of communication with the outside world. The resulting sense of tension and discomfort wouldn't have been as effective if the narration hadn't been as fully concentrated on the perspective of the protagonist.

Such mode of narration that hinges on the limited perspective and consequent obscurity is consistent with the themes of suppression and concealment in the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* in general. It reverberates with the dress and conduct code of the Handmaids who are pressured to be invisible and restrained in their behavior. Their bonnets are designed to hide a face and the Handmaids are ordered to keep the head down in public or when spoken to — a sign of obedience and humility, but also a way to prevent creators and supporters of Gilead to look in the eyes of their most damaged victims; their identities are additionally obscured by removal of their real names. For the Handmaids themselves the bonnet wings restrict the perspective like horse blinders thus limiting the very ability to see the world in its fullness.

As there are only limited means of communication in Gilead and many of them are controlled by the state, Handmaids live in an informational vacuum and don't have a comprehensive grasp on reality. The picture of the world they have is fragmentary and is shaped by propaganda, rumors, and only occasional evidence of facts. When the first Ofglen vanishes, Offred doesn't know what has happened to her. Later, Offred says that she has heard pieces of the story from Rita: "There was a black van, then footsteps on the stairs, then something quick and brutal that made her unable to scream" (1x03, 01:10). Rita didn't witness the event either. For people in Gilead, there are extremely little options to know about facts, and the audience of *The Handmaid's Tale* have almost no privilege in knowing more than the oppressed. When Offred thinks about Ofglen's disappearance, she realizes the overwhelming power of the state that wipes out the fact of a person's very existence: "She left nothing behind. No footprints. No breadcrumbs. I didn't even know her name" (1x03, 1:40). Likewise, the audience don't know Ofglen's real name until June learns it later in the series.

Because the narration immerses us in the personal perspective of the main character, we are involved directly into her perception of reality, into her experience of distress, fear, and pain. This mode of narration enables the audience to engage into the act of central imagining and to share the emotions of the character by sharing her perspective on the world she lives in and events that happen to her. Such narration evokes the bias of familiarity and mental proximity,

which gives us more understanding of the character, the circumstances of her life, and helps evaluate the significance of events for her, understand how and why she responds to events the way she does.

Another kind of congruence that follows from the character's limited perspective is that of the timing of affect. In plot threads of other characters we never see a foreshadowing of what is going to happen that will affect the Handmaid. With only a few exceptions we do not know that enemy forces are gearing up for an attack on June's languid existence. As a consequence, the viewer reacts to sudden assaults concurrently with the protagonist, which contributes to the strength of the viewer's affect and obliteration of mental and emotional distance between them and the main character.

Accordingly, we come to share the same knowledge, the timing of affect, emotional states and the overall atmosphere of Gilead while the informational deprivation disorients us and amplifies the sense of uncertainty just as the protagonist experiences them. The withdrawal of facts also contributes to the atmosphere of permanent hostility and insecurity to which June is subjected. Both June and the viewer are thus placed on the enemy territory with the limited means to resist and the limited perspective that hinders one from knowing where the enemies are hiding and when they are going to attack. Combining all that, the narrative designs the situation of a profound emotional congruence with the protagonist who is suffering not only from abuse but also from the enforced lack of knowledge and clarity — something which is psychologically challenging for her and likely for the audience as well.

The narration's engrossing pull into June's perspective is further enabled by her first-person address which is realized through the use of the voiceover. Suzanne Keen notes that this is a "potentially empathetic narrative technique",²²⁷ because it gives us a first-hand and direct experience of emotional states and mental processes of the character — a prerequisite for the viewer's emotional congruence.

By being given access to Offred's inner monologue, we get to know exactly what she is thinking and feeling. In the scenes in which her suffering is elaborated in the voiceover, the audience are provided a verbal cue for empathy, which, in combination with visual cues raises the emotional charge and intensifies the moment of experience. As an example serves the scene in the episode 1x03 where Offred comes home to see that there is police waiting for her.

²²⁷ Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy", p. 69.

While the discovery gives the audience a cue for fear and suspense, there is further escalation of tension because the development of the plot is halted by the prolonged state of Offred's agitation. At 26:10 the camera pushes extremely close on the woman's face, her downcast eyes twitching in nervous expectation. At the same time the voiceover articulates her thoughts: "Please god, I don't wanna pain. I don't wanna be a doll hung on the wall, I want to keep on living. I'll do anything. Resign my body freely to the uses of others. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce".

She not only expresses the terror of the likely outcomes — which we know are probable — but also paints vivid mental images infused with her dread: one cannot resist but imagine a hanged Handmaid and a version of broken Offred who offers her body in exchange for survival. This way, apart from the cues on the narrative and the visual level that explicate the heightened state of fear, the inner monologue also stimulates the viewer's imagination to come up with horrible images even if they are not shown on the screen. In doing so, the narration invites the viewers into the metagiedetic space where we may share the very mental space of the protagonist and even may have our subjectivity merge with hers for a moment. In this act of visualizing the imaginative emotion and being affected by the conceptions inside Offred's mind we come extremely close to know how it is to be her and how it is to feel like her — an experience of cinematic mind-reading that is a building block of empathy with the character.

While each uttered sentence conveys a strong sense of dread and inescapability from violence, there is also desperation and acute vulnerability in Offred's thoughts as well as the tragic sense of futility: she bargains with God, although the Bible is the very instrument of her oppression. Moreover, in the limited circumstances of her life the only thing she can offer as a payment is her body — which she thinks of because this is the only thing that the state is interested in. Remarkably, she doesn't allow the thought that she hadn't done anything wrong and there is no reason to be afraid of the police. The devastating note underlining this scene is that Gilead effectively destroyed the notion of justice and operates with terror, torture and intimidation. Accordingly, Offred's monologue stimulates a strong affective response in the audience by exposing them to a salient and dramatic predicament, whereas its emotional load consists of a complex layered structure of emotional cues pertaining to the narrative, contextual, visual level as well as each viewer's individual force of imagination. The congruence of emotion is established by the simultaneous learning of the presence of the police and continues in the course of the scene through cues in narrational context, acting,

verbal cues, and the first-person narration. Arguably it is also the first-person address that approximates the mentality of the viewer with the protagonist. The I-form of the utterances modulates the perceived distance between the viewer and the character, invoking the bias of proximity and making it easier to catch and mirror her emotional state. In certain cases, this scene may also cue the sense of identification with Offred.

Another role that the inner monologue plays in *Hulu's* adaptation is underscoring the load of censorship and totalitarian control on one's subjectivity and self-expression. As Handmaids learn in the Red Center, speaking up may end in a severe punishment. One also has to be careful about the content of conversations, because no one is safe from being overheard or informed on. The act of speaking, therefore, becomes a perpetual source of fright and the language becomes an instrument of obfuscation. In the novel, Offred describes how impersonal and degraded the conversations in Gilead are: "If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech."²²⁸ In these circumstances, the voiceover expresses the truth that Offred has to hide, and highlights the dichotomy of splitting one's self into two personalities: one that assents to the propaganda and the other who resists it. As a vivid example serves the dialogue between Offred and Ofglen before they find out they both don't support Gilead (1x01, 11:50-13:15):

“Ofglen #1: Blessed be the fruit.
Offred: May the Lord open. [...]
Offred: We've been sent good weather.
Ofglen #1: Which I receive with joy. The war is going well I hear.
Offred: By his hand.
Ofglen #1: We've defeated more of the rebels. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills.
We smoked them out.
Offred: Praise be.”

Notably, during the dialogue the Handmaids talk slowly and take pauses formulating their utterances. This, on one hand, is a sign of caution, since one always has to calculate their words. On the other hand, they both despise the fake and meaningless small-talk and literally force themselves to comply with the coded speech and censorship of their thoughts.

²²⁸ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 211.

In-between the lines of the aforementioned dialogue, Offred's voiceover makes a commentary intended to explain the premise of their conversation to the audience: "We go everywhere in twos. It's supposed to be for our protection, for companionship, it's bullshit. There are no friends here, can't be. The truth is that we're watching each other. She is my spy and I am hers." Ofglen's attempt to discuss the war could be a way to catch Offred on support of the opposition or other incriminating views. That way, Handmaids are made to distrust each other and even on their daily walks they can't let their guard down. Therefore, the safest way to lead a conversation is using general and meaningless phrases and preferably discuss matter-of-fact subjects like weather.

Notably, the presentation of Offred's inner monologue is used only in the scenes of her life in Gilead and are absent in flashbacks. This is symbolic of the fact that in her previous life as June, the protagonist was free in her actions and thoughts, and didn't need to live in hiding. Accordingly, every time Offred speaks in the voiceover, we are reminded of the tragic circumstances of her existence and are invited into the very headspace of the protagonist which is the only place where she can express her thoughts and be herself.

As a strong evidence of the positive influence that the first-person narration and inner dialogue have on the viewer's experience of empathy serves the point in which this narrative convention is suddenly disturbed. In the episode 2x04, Aunt Lydia is dedicated to punishing Offred for the attempted escape. She takes the Handmaid to the city wall showing her a hanged man who was one of those who helped Offred run away. His wife, it is said, was taken as a Handmaid and their son given to another family. Seeing Offred in shock and remorse, Aunt Lydia soothingly reassures her saying that it is June's fault since she conspired with the rebels; however, Offred is free of guilt as she was forcefully kidnapped by terrorists. This effectively pushes the buttons of June's conscience, inflicts a strong sense of guilt and makes her disavow the identity of June that helped her resist the Gileadean pressure. At 50:11 the camera looks extremely close at Offred's face and her voiceover says, "I am inadequate, stupid, without worth. I might as well be dead. Please, God, let Hannah forget me." Then, as she says "Let me forget me" (50:34), the shot changes to show Offred in full height from behind. The following transition of her going through the house to the gate lasts two and a half minutes, during which time we never see her face, which is an unprecedented case of her hiding from the audience. The lack of the voiceover narration highlights strongly the distancing of her person from us and even more striking is the fact that Offred doesn't greet Rita and Nick when walking past them. When Nick tries to get her attention by calling June,

she doesn't react (51:50), silently goes through the gate and stands still waiting for the shopping companion. In the last seconds, the camera finally comes to look at her face again, at which point her voiceover starts to speak in a manner of a record stuck in a loop: "We've been sent good weather. We've been sent good weather. We've been sent good weather" (52:47). In this extraordinary moment we witness the extraction of June's self from her consciousness and a fracture in the emotional connection we have built with her.

The remarkable effect of this change in narrational style continues until the end of the next episode. Except for the last scene, during the episode 2x05, Offred has only three lines of dialogue, twice saying "Yes, ma'am" and once "I'll be there". Her diegetic silence and lack of communication through the voiceover break our connection to Offred's consciousness and evokes a sense of acute estrangement. The emotional distance is also reinforced by unusually few scenes with Offred. Instead, there are long scenes showing Serena, Aunt Lydia, Nick, his wedding, and the appearance of his wife in the Waterford's household. The overall impression of this episode is that June doesn't exist anymore. It is a stark contrast to the rest of the episodes, in which we follow closely the thoughts and experiences of June/Offred. Now that the June part is gone, we learn that Offred has nothing to say and nothing to feel, she has been silenced and we can't respond to the void that ensues. Practically, we lose the object of empathy and therefore there is no source of emotions that we can share. As the degree of the character-related emotion in the episode 2x05 significantly recedes, it becomes obvious how the individual perspective of the protagonist has been guiding the emotional journey of the audience and how heavily dependent the show's narration is on the act of central imagining. Moreover, we can observe that the congruence of the viewer's emotions with emotions of the protagonist very much hinges on the character's negative appraisal of Gilead. We are ready to empathize with June/Offred when she despises Gilead, but we can't care about her as much when she stops explicating the resentment of the regime. At this point, we can see how the bias of similarity affect the engagement with the character and how identification with the protagonist is crystallized through the ability to find shared qualities in the other.

All in all, it can be concluded that the first-person narration and limited perspective of the protagonist play a significant role in the process of empathy. These narrational elements allow the audience to enter the mentality of the main character and vicariously experience the world as she sees it. Because we are granted the privileged onlooker position into the mind of June and get to see what is being hidden from Gilead, we are invited to be on the same side with the protagonist, join her in judging Gilead and follow the cues that she gives through her

words and actions. We are naturally prone to trust her, because we see the toll that the oppression has on her psyche. We don't see much of the outer world of Gilead and therefore we experience confinement in the same ideological prison that June lives in. The blunt commentary of the protagonist in her mind is of course directed at the viewer, and so we come to naturally perceive a close connection and understanding of her, and be acutely aware of her emotional state. At some point she herself acknowledges the presence of the audience, proclaiming in the voiceover "I tell, therefore you are" (2x11, 45:50). This is one of the many reasons for the audience to come to apprehend the series as extremely intimate and captivating, because June's first-person address eliminates the sense of distance between her and the viewer. This is also the reason many viewers describe the act of spectatorship of the show as being a first-hand witness to a blatant crime while being neither able to help nor to look away nor to resist empathy with the innocent victim who speaks directly to her observer. This way, as the series invites us to share June's perspective, we are also exposed to the hopes she has and the obstacles she meets — something that additionally stimulates the state of congruence with the protagonist, which we will discuss further.

5.3 Goals and obstacles

Much of the viewer's emotional work in the act of film spectatorship occurs in response to the goals of the characters and the obstacles they face. Goals and obstacles condition the narrative in that they influence the plot, provide plot points and events, reveal the personality of the character and deepen the viewer's understanding of them. Essentially, the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* is shaped by and dependent on the framework of goals and obstacles, and the protagonist's responding to them.

As we mentioned in section 2.4, it is a prevalent consequence of a positive affective disposition toward the protagonist that the viewer comes to share her goals and experience a congruent sense of pleasure upon observing outcomes beneficial for her. This state of emotional congruence with the character's journey is widely understood as a process of the imaginative perspective-taking and sometimes identification, and is therefore empathic in nature. In *The Handmaid's Tale* we are easily made to identify with the desires of the main character, because the ultimate motivation in this kind of dystopia is overcoming the oppression, longing for freedom, safety, and survival.

In the first episode, Offred proclaims that she intends to survive for as long as Gilead has her daughter Hannah. Thus the viewer is being informed about the main goal of the protagonist which frames the audience's expectation that the following story will likely move toward Offred's saving herself and probably Hannah, and accordingly will show the transformation of the protagonist from the victim into the hero. This is a clearly expressed and reasonable intention which is also relatable for the viewers who sympathize with the Handmaid.

In a dramatic contrast with the mission statement, June is placed within a system that obstructs the pursuit of individual goals. She is effectively imprisoned, helpless, and dependent on the will of her powerful adversaries. By design of the dystopian premise, June is a passive character who is restricted in action, execution of decisions and initiatives. The totalitarian control and omnipresent surveillance deny any possibility to break the rules, therefore the existence of Offred in Gilead is shaped by versatile assaults on her and her inability to retaliate. This concerns the ultimate goal of survival and subsidiary goals that vary from one episode to another.

Considering the investment that the viewer has in June's good fortune, each obstacle to her well-being is a concurrent stress factor in the course of the show. Most of the episodes have a rollercoaster dynamic, in which a low point is followed by a positive tendency, which then worsens or even aggravates continuously in several stages. The *Hulu* adaptation's typical structure of goals and obstacles can be examined through the plot line of Offred's possible pregnancy that begins in the episode 1x03. It is being revealed that Offred is late, which is likely to mean that she has gotten pregnant. On the one hand, this plot point could be considered positive because pregnancy grants Offred — albeit temporary — immunity from physical abuse. On the other hand, bringing a baby into Gilead is a tragedy for the mother and the child, the fact that is likely to provide a dark underlining to the achievement of the goal of procreation. Thus, the viewer is simultaneously confronted with conflicting emotions toward the situation Offred finds herself in.

Subsequently, the narration moves toward framing the plot point as a streak of fortune: Serena is happy about having a baby and becomes extremely kind to the Handmaid. Everything is going unusually well and both Offred and the audience enjoy a state of a rare peace in the Waterford's household. At the end of the episode, however, Offred comes with the news that she is not pregnant after all. In a matter of seconds, the smiling and joyful Serena flows into a rage, assaults Offred and locks her in her bedroom. As the Handmaid is left crying on the floor, the viewer understands and shares Offred's anguish at the fact that she is unjustly

blamed for the natural biological processes in her body. Once again, June's fortune has been repealed.

The next episode starts with a bleak mood since the Handmaid has been in isolation for thirteen days. Here, the narration again provides an indication of a positive change, however it does not occur. After Offred faints, she is allowed to go to the doctor. As Offred hears the news, the camera captures her elevated spirit, while in the voiceover she rejoices about leaving her bedroom prison: "The doctor is on the other side of the town. That's a whole hour each way, if I walk slow. An hour of outside and rain and flowers and fresh fucking air" (1x04, 10:25-11:16). But just as she is about to enjoy the walk, Serena orders her into the car, to be taken there and back to her confinement having a glimpse of freedom only from behind the window. Again, Offred's intention did not realize, and as she is being seated in the car with curtains that block sunlight, the audience stays with her sharing the oppressive atmosphere that continues to dominate the plot.

As with the latter example, the subgoals of the main character — like an intention to have a walk — are obstructed. In the course of the two seasons, this narrative structure shapes one's viewing experience in general. When we are invited to enjoy a state of peace while the protagonist is not in danger, we are proven again and again that things never go as Offred wants, and as she doesn't get her desires fulfilled, accordingly, neither do we.

Such formula of devising constant obstacles for the protagonist who can't overcome them, results in a mode of affect for the viewer that is called "saturation". Torben Grodal applies this term in regard to identification with the passive protagonist who is "paralyzed into inaction".²²⁹ Because the character's capacities are limited and her desires can not be transformed into the act of fulfillment, it sends the viewer in a state of accumulated tension. When the character's emotion at this point is being properly communicated through visual means, the viewer's understanding of context and meaning of the situation for the protagonist invokes the congruent emotional state. Thus, the viewer is likely to attune to the emotional perspective of Offred and come to actually experience the sense of entrapment and helplessness in the world of Gilead. The fact that we follow the limited perspective of the main character also means that we share the timing of affect when obstacles occur and therefore the act of mirroring the reaction and emotion of the protagonist comes naturally.

²²⁹ Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, p. 56.

To sustain the congruence of emotion, the narration repeats the acts of complications and puts Offred's life and health under threat, obstructing her pursuit of safety and survival. Even more, it also sustains the degree of conflict, by showing the impotence of one person in the face of the totalitarian control. It is being demonstrated persistently that the only way to stay alive in Gilead is to keep one's head down and silently comply with the rules. The protagonist's action, moreover, is impeded not only by the evil regime but by the few positive characters as well, which only adds to the scale of the obstacles she is set against. When June dares to say that Emily is her friend and is being punished for that, Nick asks her to never rebel again, "You can't change anything about this. It's gonna end the same no matter what you do, so there's no point in trying to be tough or brave. Brave isn't a part of any of this. Everybody breaks. Everybody" (1x03, 21:24-21:40). When June tries to persuade Moira to run away, her friend would rather avoid the risk, "I know the way out. Black van, feet first. That's it" (1x08, 38:08). For the audience who are expecting an evolution and emancipation of June's character, her active resistance against the oppressors and taking revenge for her suffering, both seasons dramatically hinder that and provide exceptionally little gratification and plenty of tension.

On the whole, in the course of the first season, Offred can not and does not influence any significant event in her life: she remains imprisoned at home, neither tries to escape nor looks for ways to find her daughter, she is being constantly punished and physically abused. In terms of Offred's desire to save Hannah, this is neither realized nor attempted and remains rather inert. Moreover, Offred's situation aggravates because she gets pregnant and will soon have two children in the hands of Gilead.

The second season has a little different goal orientation. It is more action-filled and has two main goals that the narrative lets Offred actively working toward, albeit still mostly to no avail: Offred's running away from Gilead and trying to save the newborn baby. Remarkably, the escape in the first episode is, again, a plot point that happens to her rather than is initiated by her. But once on the run, she is determined to keep running and shows a proactive action in which she makes decisions and initiates actions. The plot line of the escape takes two and a half episodes and creates a strong sense of hope for the protagonist and the viewer. Seeing June empowered by the freedom is an emotional high for the audience, and the hope naturally intensifies the closer June is to reaching the Canadian border. Narratively, the viewer's expectation of the successful escape is being shaped by the way June gradually overcomes obstacles while on the run: she manages to find the right way out of the hospital; Later she

persuades the unwilling driver to take her out to the next place of hiding; She leaves the safe house on her own accord; She boards the train and manages to remain unseen; She successfully reaches the airfield at the right time for the pilot to take her on board. Just as this chain of lucky events pinnacles in the moment the plane starts moving and June is just one step away from freedom, we hear the shots fired — the moment in which the suddenness and salience of the ambush scene crashes the spirit of June as well as of the audience.

After Offred is back in Gilead, in the course of two episodes she is demoralized, disassociated, unmotivated to live and carry on with the pregnancy. It is a streak of the character's 'dark night of the soul' and similarly stressful for the audience who was as close as June to the escape from Gilead. Narratively, it is a plot device that once again reinforces the intensity of distress and unpredictability of the story, and pits viewer's desires of the good outcome against the impossibility of fulfilling them.

However, waking up at the hospital at the end of the fifth episode, Offred is metaphorically resurrected and sets a new goal of saving her new baby. Subsequently she actively pursues it, however within the limited means of her circumstances: she asks Aunt Lydia and Rita to keep an eye on Holly after she leaves to the new posting and tries to persuade Serena to change some rules imposed on girls in Gilead, at which she fails. However then comes the effective help — the escape arranged by the Marthas — again occurring without Offred's knowledge. The following development leads to a remarkable plot twist at the season's finale which has to be discussed in order to understand the relation of the aforementioned narrative elements to the viewer's experience of empathy.

A TV show's season finale is by design one of the most challenging parts of the narrative framework. It should provide a sense of closure in regard to important plot lines but also leave some of them open to potential development. Often, there would be featured a cliffhanger in order to ensure that the audience come back to see the continuation of the story. Because a season's finale must deliver a resolution, the viewer's reception of it is fundamentally a reaction to the way the goals of the fictional characters have been realized.

In the second season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist's dramatic arc is shaped by her intention to survive, to resist the Gileadean regime, and to save Holly. When she is offered help in running away, which happens unexpectedly several minutes before the end, this opens up a way for all these goals to be achieved. The audience is naturally aligned with the intention to get out and instantly takes side with the Handmaid in the act of responding to the given chance. Although the viewers have been conditioned to see Offred's plans fail, we

nevertheless hope for the good outcome — firstly because we are caught in the moment of pure affect as Offred has no time to think but only act, and secondly, because we realize that the series can not repeat its methods of sabotaging the protagonist's escape. This time, however, it is not Gilead that devises an obstacle to Offred's freedom, but she herself: just before she is about to get into the car, she decides to stay and save her first daughter.

This twist at which the season ends has caused an extremely negative reaction from the audience as well as from critics who called the finale “ludicrous”²³⁰ and “nonsensical”.²³¹ *Time* also mentioned that this became “the last straw for many viewers”,²³² meaning that the cliffhanger effectively alienated some of the audience of the series.

The negative reaction of the viewers provides a crucial insight into the mechanism of cinematic empathy. As soon as Offred makes the decision to stay, the garnered, strong empathetic bond and allegiance between her and the viewer essentially breaks. We practically come out of the state of congruence and do not want what the protagonist wants, therefore experiencing what Zillmann calls *counterempathy*. We haven't been given clues of an intention to stay, therefore we lose the insight into Offred's mentality and do not understand her actions. When Offred explains that she can't abandon Hannah, this sounds implausible and not true to the character because it is inconsistent with her past actions — the Handmaid never actively tried to find Hannah before and was about to escape several times without her, albeit with the sense of guilt. Essentially, the lack of the goal to save Hannah from the narrative of the show challenges the allegiance we have established with the character and makes us apprehend the finale as a major self-inflicted obstacle that doesn't provide closure. Furthermore, such cliffhanger might be seen by some viewers as an act of exploitation of their investment in the story as it is being quite ostensibly shown that the series does not cease to provide false promises and never fulfill them. Also, the inconsistency might signal to some viewers that it is the show's writers rather than the character who make the decision, thus

²³⁰ Pat Stacey, “The Handmaid's Tale season 3: Series is floundering since overtaking Margaret Atwood's book”, *Independent*, 10.06.2019, www.independent.ie/entertainment/television/tv-reviews/the-handmaids-tale-season-3-series-is-floundering-since-overtaking-margaret-atwoods-book-38196152.html, 4.04.2020.

²³¹ Judy Berman, “The Handmaid's Tale Could Be So Much Better. But First It Has to Leave Its Star Behind”, *Time*, 27.06.2019, time.com/5614125/the-handmaids-tale-season-3/, 4.04.2020.

²³² *ibid.*

artificially prolonging the tale that could have ended right now,²³³ with June liberated and brought to safety.

It is interesting that Offred's reason to stay is actually reasonable and even noble, it speaks to the good character of the protagonist and the power of the motherly love. Certainly, the audience who have sympathized with her pain of having lost Hannah would also understand her inclination to get her back. However, the audience clearly want the protagonist to board the car and leave Gilead. The discord that occurs at this plot point, therefore, has also to do with the fact that in order to identify with the goal to save Hannah we need to have established an emotional engagement with her. However, we have been given no cues for empathy with the girl through her own storyline, perspective, or otherwise. We don't really know who she is and how she lives her life with the new parents in Gilead. Has the narration been focused on Hannah's suffering as much as it has in regard to Offred, the finale would not have been perceived as alienating.

Incidentally, this case provides a commentary to claims of Smith and Zillmann who spoke about the process of sharing the goals of the characters. As can be concluded from the latter example, a disruption of the congruence with the protagonist is possible when the film breaks the imposed rules of narration and motivation or — what may be the case in *The Handmaid's Tale* — intends to create a conflict between the character and the audience. Additionally, this case proves Carroll's statement that the viewer does maintain the sense of self and doesn't merge fully with the persona on screen.

Moreover, we get a clue about the role of identification in the sense of seeing ourselves in a fictional character. Considering that the film's narration imposes the character's predicaments on the audience, there arises a question: Do we feel frustration because we simply like June and wish her safety, or do we want June to run away because we ourselves want to escape Gilead through her? Does the resistance to June's decision mean that we identify with her as Offred and therefore we want us both to avoid the life of subjugation? It can be hypothesized that our desire for a different ending is explained by a vicarious experience of belonging to the world of Gilead in some way. We implicitly realize the complications of the decision for *ourselves* — we will have to go back to Gilead. If so, this speaks to the fact that we have built

²³³ Among other things, the author says, "It's totally nonsensical for June to turn around and go back to Gilead, but it's also the only way forward for the drama that finally put Hulu's original productions on the map, including the kind of Emmy haul last year that Netflix and Amazon are still dreaming about." Alan Sepinwall, "Did 'Handmaid's Tale' Season 2 Finale Just Take Down the Series?", *Rolling Stone*, 11.07.2018, www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/handmaids-tale-season-2-finale-696098/, 4.04.2020.

a strong parasocial relationship with the character and allowed her to immerse us in the fictional reality in which she lives. Also, it is apparent that we have been able to see ourselves in the persona of the Handmaid when the logic of the narrative created the favorable goal orientation. When rules change, however, and June herself becomes a source of her future suffering when she comes back to Gilead, this is something the audience has not yet been conditioned to experience. This way, the structure of goals and obstacles provides an important insight into how the viewers engage with the developing of the fictional plot and how important it is for maintaining the viewer's empathic response.

5.4 Flashbacks to the present and allusions to reality

In the study of narrative techniques of *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale* we have seen that a common factor in eliciting an empathic response is often the intrinsic ability of the viewer to recognize similar, familiar, or realistic qualities in characters and in the world surrounding them. In this last subsection on the subject we will look into yet another crucial strategy with which the show initiates empathy by using real-life parallels that approximate the viewer's reality with the fiction.

The role of perceiving realism in cinematic fictions has been studied by Nico Frijda and Ed Tan. They maintain that realistic events and actions in a film stimulate a particularly strong and congruent emotional response. "We are not afraid when we know for sure that someone is only pretending to threaten us"²³⁴ they say, however if the threat feels likely to exist, the audience would be genuinely scared as if they themselves were in peril. This way, the realistic depiction of distressing events and character's reactions to them evokes a congruent and intense emotional response from the viewer. *The Handmaid's Tale* uses this strategy prolifically to induce the viewers with actual fears projected onto the real world and stimulate dread of dystopian tendencies in the immediate reality they live in.

"The most horrifying moments of the show continue to be those that present a warped nightmare version of a world very similar to our own",²³⁵ writes Anna Silman in *The Cut*, which is one of many reviews admitting that it is the recognition of the present time and similar events in the show that makes the act of spectatorship of the series so affective. One of

²³⁴ Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film. Film as an Emotion Machine*, p. 45.

²³⁵ Anna Silman, "The Most Traumatizing Moments From *The Handmaid's Tale* Season Premiere", *The Cut*, 25.04.2018, www.thecut.com/2018/04/scariest-moments-from-the-handmaids-tale-season-2-premiere.html, 4.04.2020.

the ways in which the *Hulu* adaptation creates parallels between the fictional Gilead and the modern United States is by showing in flashbacks a world which bears strong resemblance to the modern America.

Although it is never disclosed when the extremist revolution happened, the pre-Gileadean period has indicators of the time not different from our own, among other things it is the contemporary language, references to brands like *Tinder*, *Uber*, and *Airbnb*, appearance of current technology, and a general ambiance of a first-world democratic society in which people enjoy equal rights and freedoms. Giving this familiar setting an ominous undertone, the show's narration creates what Anne Petersen describes as “jarring moments of *presentness*”,²³⁶ which assumes a sense of a feasible threat and topicality for the audience.

In the flashbacks we see how the American nation becomes increasingly conservative and authoritative in the face of the falling birthrates. Women are being judged for their independence and made to get the husband's approval to buy birth control pills. Soon, women lose control over their own money which banks transfer to their next male of kin. Working mothers are being blamed for putting career before family and eventually are denied the right to work. Gay people are being harassed and discriminated against. Policemen shoot at the crowd during a peaceful protest. By merely situating these events in the timeline we can identify as our present, the series invites the viewer to impose our own outlook on current fragile social issues and in doing so recognize the similarity or project own fears to see the parallelism of the two worlds — the real and the fictional. An article in *The Guardian* picks up on that aspect, noting that there is a specific kind of realism conveyed through the flashbacks in the series:

“Watching Offred, then called June, being slowly and insidiously punished in an America not far from the one we know, is terrifyingly realisable. She is marched from her office with stunned colleagues because women aren't allowed to earn income. She stares at an ATM screen as it denies her a withdrawal, disbelief all over her slack face. Strangely, these comparably lesser injustices shock almost as much as the sexual violence she endures later; we have jobs, we use ATMs. The small horrors have their own power.”²³⁷

As can be discerned from this commentary, the viewer is appalled by the instances of injustice not independently but in congruence with the characters. Notably, the article mentions

²³⁶ Peterson, “The Radical Feminist Aesthetic of ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’”.

²³⁷ Sian Cain, “The Handmaid's Tale on TV: too disturbing even for Margaret Atwood”, *The Guardian*, 25.05.2017, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/may/25/the-handmaids-tale-on-tv-too-disturbing-even-for-margaret-atwood, 4.04.2020.

character's reactions upon witnessing sudden radical changes. The silent astonishment of female employees who are being fired and June's face expression at the failing money withdrawal are essential visual cues that together with the contextual meaning strengthen the stimulus of these narrational elements. They are also likely to cue empathy through emotional contagion upon witnessing facial expressions, through the bias of familiarity and similarity, perspective-taking and identification in the sense of being able to relate to the feelings and experiences of women in the described scenes. At the same time, we see that the author of the article Sian Cain apprehends the events in the given flashbacks through schemas of the real world: it is enough to see an ATM machine or a mundane workplace to inadvertently put herself in the situation that June is in and at the same time imagine the fictional scenario taking place in reality. This way, throwbacks to June's past have an important role of providing a sense of realism to the fictional story and force viewer's emotional engagement with the series. Because the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* is strictly speaking a fantasy, flashbacks bridge the gap between reality and fiction making the viewer believe in Gilead and therefore attach more significance to dramatic moments in the series.

Furthermore, the overall themes of the show stimulate the viewer to experience fear of the real-life policies and events through the engagement and empathy with the protagonist. Since the series had been in development for years before premiering in the spring of 2017 — the first year of the presidency of Donald Trump — its concurrence with reality can be ascribed to a matter of chance. Nevertheless the fact remains that the viewers see the show as a commentary on the current social climate²³⁸ and an accurate reflection of the time we live in.²³⁹ Watching *The Handmaid's Tale* against the backdrop of anachronistic and authoritarian qualities of the present Republican government in the United States has been often described in terms of a dystopian fiction.²⁴⁰ Allusions to the Gileadean ideology have been observed among other things, in the President's false statements²⁴¹ and obfuscation of language,²⁴²

²³⁸ Stokes, "Review: 'The Handmaid's Tale' is really, truly terrifying".

²³⁹ Fiona Sturges, "Cattleprods! Severed tongues! Torture porn! Why I've stopped watching the Handmaid's Tale", *The Guardian*, 16.06.2018, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jun/16/handmaids-tale-season-2-elisabeth-moss-margaret-atwood, 4.04.2020.

²⁴⁰ Josh K. Elliott, "Trump 2018 or Orwell's '1984'? President's speech prompts comparisons to dystopian novel", *Global News*, 25.07.2018, globalnews.ca/news/4352287/donald-trump-1984-george-orwell/, 4.04.2020.

²⁴¹ Charles M. Blow, "Trump Savagely Mauls the Language", *The New York Times*, 17.07.2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/opinion/donald-trump-english-language-.html, 4.04.2020.

²⁴² *ibid.*

tolerance of neo-Nazism,²⁴³ and appointment of the government officials who hold fundamentalist,²⁴⁴ extremist²⁴⁵ and nationalist²⁴⁶ views. Additionally, it is the wave of anti-abortion laws in the United States that alerted the show's viewers and made Stephen Colbert jokingly proclaim that "Alabama [...] might be doing some sort of viral marketing for [...] *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale*".²⁴⁷ *Variety* in particular argued that restrictive laws were the reason that the show "is in greater demand now than ever — 27 times more in demand than the average TV show in the U.S."²⁴⁸

Furthermore, one of the most remarkable events happened in regard to the scandal of family separation on the Southern border of the United States, creating a harrowing modern parallel to the practice of child-stealing in Gilead. Even more so, the uncanny similarity of reality with the Atwood's fiction was provided by the US Attorney General and the Press Secretary who defended the policy by citing the Bible.²⁴⁹ As the border control scandal has been one of the major subjects discussed in the media from April until June 2018,²⁵⁰ it was April 25th when *The Handmaid's Tale* aired the episode 2x02 "Unwomen" and June 20th when it released the episode 2x10 "The Last Ceremony". The former episode includes a major storyline that shows Emily's past when she was separated from her wife and child at the airport. And the latter episode features a plot line where June gets to have a short meeting with her daughter Hannah — the first time in three or four years after June's attempted escape. Starting at 41:00 the scene shows in excruciating detail the torment of a mother who's been separated from her child and the child's reliving the trauma yet again. Happy to see her daughter, June reaches to

²⁴³ Ben Jacobs, Oliver Laughland, "Charlottesville: Trump reverts to blaming both sides including 'violent alt-left'", *The Guardian*, 16.08.2017, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/15/donald-trump-press-conference-far-right-defends-charlottesville, 4.04.2020.

²⁴⁴ Jane Mayer, "The Danger of President Pence", *The New Yorker*, 16.10.2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/23/the-danger-of-president-pence, 4.04.2020.

²⁴⁵ Amanda Holpuch, "Stephen Miller: why is Trump's white nationalist aide untouchable?", *The Guardian*, 4.12.2019, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/04/stephen-miller-trump-administration-white-nationalism, 4.04.2020.

²⁴⁶ Natalie Nougayrède, "Steve Bannon is on a far-right mission to radicalise Europe", *The Guardian*, 6.06.2018, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/06/steve-bannon-far-right-radicalise-europe-trump, 4.04.2020.

²⁴⁷ Stephen Colbert, "25 Republican Men Ban Abortion In Alabama", *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 15.05.2019, www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=50&v=f-ag5kf1cOE&feature=emb_title, 0:37-0:58.

²⁴⁸ Daniel Turchiano, "How 'The Handmaid's Tale' Uses Costumes to Denote Characters' Mental States in Season 3", *Variety*, 11.06.2019, variety.com/2019/artisans/features/the-handmaids-tale-season-3-costume-design-serena-emily-interview-1203234507/, 4.04.2020.

²⁴⁹ Ben Jacobs, "Sanders uses Bible to defend Trump's separation of children from families at border", *The Guardian*, 15.06.2018, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/14/sarah-sanders-bible-trump-immigration-border-policy, 4.04.2020.

²⁵⁰ Alan Gomez, "Democrats grill Trump administration officials over family separation policy on the border", *USA Today*, 17.12.2019, eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/02/07/democrats-trump-administration-family-separation-policy-border-immigration/2794324002/, 4.04.2020.

hug Hannah but she breaks away and runs back to her Martha. In this moment June understands that Hannah might not remember or want to see her. After a while, when the girl finally responds to June's warmth, the guardians signal the end of the meeting and rip them apart, separating the family once again. As Hannah weeps and tries to run back to her mother, June smiles through tears, soothes her daughter and asks her to love her new parents. When Hannah is gone, devastated June falls to the ground howling in pain and sobbing fervently for almost a minute. Outside of the real-life context at the time of the release of the episode, this scene merely provides empathy cues through salience and the narrative context. Dramatic writing, cinematography and visceral performance put the explicit pain of the protagonist into close proximity with the viewer: the camera stays close to the teared eyes of the mother who has to win her little daughter's trust; it captures June's careful movements as she tries to hug her daughter and pained face expression upon hearing that Hannah has been thinking for years that her mother abandoned and didn't try to find her. These emotional cues rely on the universal emotional response of facial mimicry, emotional contagion, sympathy to the tragic family circumstances, and empathy with the familiar and likable character experiencing a heightened state of distress.

But the political context provides an additional emotional stimulus toward the aforementioned scene. Watching it at the time when the American government takes children from their parents and holds them in cages enhances the salience and proximity of the shown events to the immediate experience of the audience, even if it is based on the passive witnessing of the news. It is the fact of reality being no more distinguishable from the dystopia that makes us share the concerns of the main character and imagine ourselves in the place of someone whose rights are taken away. Such concerns are no longer only June's, but also those of the viewer, because the viewer's rights and freedom are at stake. The episode's writer Yahlin Chang noted this empathic effect that materialized in the scene due to the real-life events:

"I'm glad it's hard to watch and I'm glad that it will hit home in terms of showing how wrong it is to rip kids away from their parents....Part of what's great about TV and narrative in general is that it makes you imagine yourself in another person's shoes, and that's the first step toward empathy. If we could have more empathy for these mothers and kids who are separated, that's gotta be a good thing. If we could try and experience what they're experiencing, then maybe that would help make things like this policy not happen."²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Emily T. V. D. Werff, "Handmaid's Tale writer Yahlin Chang on what she learned researching child separations", *Vox*, 20.06.2018, www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/20/17482370/the-handmaids-tale-family-separation-episode-10-recap-yahlin-chang, 4.04.2020.

Remarkably, the aforementioned episode had been written before the border policy became known and together with many other similarities acquired topicality somewhat accidentally. However, as the juxtaposition of *The Handmaid's Tale* and modern America has become a major part of the viewer's emotional response, the show's creators proceeded to making an even more blunt statement. In 2019, during the Super Bowl broadcast, *Hulu* showed a teaser trailer for the third season of the show, in which they explicitly bridged the reality with the fictional Gilead. The trailer imitates the famous Ronald Reagan's commercial *Morning in America*²⁵² from 1984. The *Hulu's* 25-second video²⁵³ starts in a soothing and inspirational style of the original, and then interrupts the utopian vision to show Handmaids standing on the grounds of the State Capitol. Instead of the Washington Monument, however, there looms a giant cross. The mood becomes darker and the familiar voice of the protagonist says, "Wake up, America. Morning's over."

As can be judged by the straightforwardness of the message, *Hulu* actively encourages the audience to perceive their reality through the prism of the Atwood's dystopia. As a narrational strategy, it aims at a stronger emotional engagement with the series and it succeeds to do so, because a fear for one's own life enters in the emotional process during the spectatorship of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

To further merge the viewer's reality with the fictional dystopia the series shows Americans familiar places and buildings. One of them is the Boston's Cathedral Church of St. Paul; June sees it being demolished — a brutal act of disassembling not only the building but also its significance, as it is the place where June's father served as a pastor and where her daughter was baptized. In doing it, Gilead eliminates memories of its citizens and menacingly demonstrates to the film audience that no order lasts forever. The same dark undertone bears the appearance of the Fenway Park — a baseball stadium in Boston which in Gilead serves as a place for mass execution of innocent women. And together with June, the viewer is taken to the empty abandoned headquarters of *The Boston Globe* — the building in which employees paid with their lives for the freedom of speech and of the press. As June looks at the pages of the newspaper that never left the building, the viewer is implicitly invited to draw a parallel between the authoritarian eradication of opposing views and the war of the current President against the media that criticize his actions.

²⁵² "It's Morning Again in America", Creator: Tuesday Team, 1984, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwSY, 4.04.2020.

²⁵³ "The Handmaid's Tale Season 3 Trailer", *TV Promos*, 3.02.2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu0a77_JydA, 4.04.2020.

In such evocation of real places and institutions the series sends the viewer a symbolic warning of a sweeping force of ideological transformations able to destroy the peace and democracy taken for granted today. Through these scenes, the *Hulu* adaptation seeks to focalize the likelihood of political escalation to tyranny and wants to make the viewer uncomfortable about the current worldwide shift to the right. The stark contrast between the experience of freedom and a feasible shift to oppression evokes a strong empathic response, which is based on similarity, familiarity and what may be called a shared experience of the viewers and the protagonist — which has to do with the process of identification and being able to personally relate to the presented afflictions. Thus, the affective quality of *The Handmaid's Tale's* narration is enabled among other things more than just by a horrifying scenario of falling victim to the fascist regime. Rather it is the relation of this dystopian world to the current sociopolitical reality which, when considered in parallel with the series, might resemble Gilead in some ways already or have enough predisposition for a similar totalitarian outcome. The series shows the horror of the oppressed existence in the immediate contraposition with the reality of the viewer and evokes empathy with the protagonist by way of seeing our own reflection in her suffering.

The storytelling strategy of creating allusions to the viewer's reality fits within the show's larger framework of empathy cues on the narrative level. It enhances one's engagement with the theme of the story in general and makes one pay attention to its development. Attention and interest are certainly necessary for ensuring the viewer's emotional response to the content of the series. And apart from that, the affective predisposition and sympathy toward the main character solidifies our capacity for sharing her concerns, feelings and mental states. The narrative techniques discussed in this chapter are used prolifically to explicate those and make June's inner life feel intelligible, accessible, and easy to relate to. As the rules of empathy bias affirm, we respond to other's emotional states depending on the proximity of the object to ourselves, whether it is physical or psychological proximity or the scope of attributes we have in common. Likewise, the five aforementioned narrative techniques work toward approximation of our mentality to that of the Handmaid. As a result, June's fears become to a large extent our fears, because we identify with the desire to live in freedom and safety. June's suffering becomes our own, because we apprehend the suffocating world of Gilead through her perspective, we witness the toll that the slavery has on her psyche, and we are as tormented of being in this world ourselves.

6. Cinematic strategies of empathy in *The Handmaid's Tale*

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the visual language of *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to understand how it speaks to the viewer's propensity to empathize with the protagonist of the series. Although we will also touch upon the role of the sound in film, predominantly we will explore how cinematography and acting bolster the emotive effect of the narrative plane and what kind of an emotional experience their synthesis conceives for the audience.

In this regard, it has to be noted that some of the relevant techniques (e.g. lighting, color grading, framing and editing) may not be stimulating empathy directly, but rather contingently through the combination with each other and with the narrative context. Nevertheless, they should be taken into account in the study of empathy as they are not irrelevant for its occurrence: they convey mood and atmosphere, cue the viewer's attention, devise a smooth flow of narration, and overall make the diegetic universe come alive thus inviting the audience to immerse into the emotional landscape of the story. Therefore, the fact of layering and mutual reinforcement of cinematic techniques in the series will be quite significant for the analysis.

6.1 Visual style

One of the most distinctive features of *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale* is the cinematic look and the overall aesthetically pleasing form that stands in dramatic contrast to the dark and harrowing content of the story. The showrunner of the series states that the visual style of the adaptation is driven by the idea of creating a painting-like imagery — both beautiful and realistic — which would invite the audience to imagine themselves in it.²⁵⁴ Because the narration works toward immersing the audience inside the mind of the protagonist, the exposure to and identification with her suffering can have an aversive effect. Therefore, the use of cinematic techniques that provide visual pleasure can be argued to be an important factor in keeping hold of the viewers who struggle with emotional challenges of the story. Elizabeth Moss affirms this assumption by saying that the show's imagery has a hypnotizing effect that makes one unable to look away even if something horrible is happening.²⁵⁵ It is a

²⁵⁴ Recode Staff, "Full transcript: 'The Handmaid's Tale' writer and producer Bruce Miller on Recode Decode".

²⁵⁵ Jada Yuan, "Elisabeth Moss Is the Queen of Peak TV", *Vulture*, www.vulture.com/2017/04/elisabeth-moss-handmaids-tale-feminism-and-peak-tv.html, 4.04.2020.

very important factor in forcing empathy, because as long as one keeps looking, one is kept in the grasp of the salient suffering of the protagonist.

Indeed, the world of Gilead has a beautiful facade. Its evocative imagery and attention to detail take hold of the spectators' attention and lure them on the inside. It captivates with the pictorial aesthetic, the otherworldly softness of the image, lens flare, slow motion, shafts of light and pools of darkness. The exteriors show spacious orderly surroundings which are often filmed from the bird's-eye view relishing the meticulous geometry and the flow of movement on the ground. The interior of the Waterford's house where most of the scenes are set is organized in a minimalist style in a mostly low-key monochrome color palette. The walls are painted dark shades of green, which becomes a contrasting background to the objects placed in front of them. This way, the action occurring in the foreground gains in prominence and a mesmerizing power — for instance, a shot of Moss's face set against the darkness of the room accentuates the moment of experience and the emotion which she is expressing becomes a salient visual stimuli that seizes the viewer's attention (Figure 1). Together with the chiaroscuro lighting, such shots strongly allude to Renaissance paintings and in doing so capture the deeply embedded notion of life coming to a standstill.



(Figure 1: 1x04, 29:25)

The notion of “still life” quite fits the dormant world that Gilead has created by turning to the archaic practices, defying progress and prohibiting women from being occupied and engaged in life's activities. The oppressive stillness of such existence is rendered through the slow

tempo of the characters' movements and speech, through the slow motion as well as the long duration of takes, shots, and scenes. To that add up sequences where no developing action occurs and in which Offred spends time in her bedroom with nothing to do except pondering, reminiscing and dreading. Together with the minimalist surrounding, constant pauses, slowly recited dialogues and an unhurried pace of the plot, the temporal aspect of the film reproduces the ennui and void from the perspective of the protagonist. Her time in Gilead, says Offred, is blank, it consists of "the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound".²⁵⁶ The Handmaid's time is not filled with an occupation but it also doesn't really belong to her. Her life is merely made up of idle stretches between the regulated appointments. Stepping into the world of Gilead, the audience experiences the flow of time very much as the Handmaid does. In a storytelling strategy that does not focus on the rapid progression of the plot, time itself becomes a tool that brings Offred's subjectivity to the outer expression and invites the viewer to share her perception of it.

In such a languid temporal orientation, it is especially important to hold the attention of the audience. One of the show's methods for achieving it is a prolific use of a symmetrical, Kubrick-esque one-point perspective — a formal framing of the shot that puts an object exactly in the center of the image (Figure 2). This type of framing is used in *The Handmaid's Tale* to create a cinematic effect, stimulate visual pleasure, control the trajectory of the viewer's gaze and convey the ideological character of Gilead which is rooted in the desire to design a perfect organization of the world order. Moreover, the one-point perspective may convey the subjective perspective of the main character — her feeling of being small and powerless against the larger forces affecting her life (Figure 3). Such spatial orientation in which the negative space overwhelms the central subject by scale bears an unnerving psychological effect, rendering unease, doom, or sense of pressure and danger that is looming around the protagonist and is threatening the audience.

²⁵⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 79.



(Figure 2: 1x01, 14:56)



(Figure 3: 1x03, 09:00)

An additional role in the act of focalizing the viewer's attention plays the volumetric lighting (Figure 4). It not only animates the image through play of light and darkness, but also provides texture by making visible the layers of colors and shadows. Moreover, the resulting beams of light generate an effect known as 'god rays', something which plays to the theme of the religious ideology of the series. This way, the light is used to activate the air and the minimalist spaces otherwise dormant and lacking in movement.



(Figure 4: 1x01, 05:16)

Another way that the image receives expressivity is what a show's director Kari Skogland calls *heavy air*²⁵⁷ — a practice of infusing the negative space with dynamic elements such as snow, rain, thick shadows or dust particles. Apart from the cinematic look and visual aesthetic that emanate from the use of the technique, heavy air also conveys a specific mood, provides texture to the image making it more realistic and voluminous (Figure 5).



(Figure 5: 1x10, 46:09)

²⁵⁷ "The Handmaid's Tale Director Breaks Down the Funeral Scene", *Vanity Fair*, 20.08.2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehjA5mvgLf0, 4.04.2020, 1:01.

Practically every visual element on the screen is loaded with expressivity that helps to maintain emotional receptiveness, focalize the viewer's attention and hinder one's mind from wandering. Apart from that, the implicit symbolism behind the used cinematography techniques bring out the character traits, circumstances or inward feelings of the protagonist to the surface of the image. One of the key elements of this is also the metaphor-laden color scheme of the image, predominantly of the narration that situates in Gilead. While the images in flashbacks are presented quite realistically, the color grading of the exteriors in the Gileadean timeline presents a stylized, filter-processed palette of slightly subdued hues of sepia, blue and green together with a hard contrast in black. The predominant colors of the regime are reflected in the attire of the residents: black costumes of the Commanders, their staff and policemen, brown for the Aunts, blue for the Wives, green for Marthas. In this color theme, the crimson red dresses of Handmaids are remarkably prominent and eye-catching. Red serves as the signifier of a sinful otherness and clearly alludes to such cultural symbols as the scarlet letter and figure of Mary Magdalene; red stands for fertility, but also for sin, lust, flesh and blood. Just as there is a perpetual fight between good and evil, between the Gileadean desire to procreate and the monstrous means to achieve that, red also has two sides that symbolize both life and death. Apart from that, red is a signifier of danger, a warning, a distress signal, a red flag: Handmaids are untouchables; they are considered dirty and not worthy of being treated as equals by other social strata. However, they are despised just as they are desired and needed by the childless society. The Handmaids' outfits are also a security measure: a person in a red cloak could not easily hide in plain sight. A woman in red is a moving target for shooters, although one doesn't easily get to see whose face is under the cape — the cloaks erase the notion of individuality and anonymize the person wearing it. The costumes of the Handmaids, therefore, carry the function of visibility and concealment at the same time, which is reflective of the impossible expectations of the ruling class toward the women who should renounce themselves and submit to the servitude while also being grateful for it.

Because of the salience both on the visual plane as well as in the subtext of the narrative, color red inadvertently draws the viewer's gaze and summons an emotional response through the layers of meanings and associations with it. In a cinematic image, red has an unusual power to affect, says Brian Massumi, it bears the notion of a wound and brings a spectator in close contact with the pain and the injury that traverses into our real life: "The color red

always bleeds...Red bleeds and blood flows involve a literal affective contagion.”²⁵⁸ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, red does become synonymic with the violence and becomes the symbol of the horrible fate of Handmaids and their everyday oppression. When a woman in red is on the screen, there is always a trauma, a torment, an abuse that is either visible or concealed. When there are gatherings of Handmaids, red literally fills the screen, the scale of pain expands and the magnitude of collective oppression becomes tangible (Figure 6). When a drone shot captures Offred down on the snow-covered ground, her figure looks like a drop of blood spilled on a canvas (2x11, 02:02). When Offred is in the sterile-white environment of the hospital (1x04, 17:22 and 2x01, 34:40), the piercing color of her dress communicates her inner scream while she herself must stay calm. Eventually, red becomes a conditioning factor and a visual cue for empathy, because it becomes an evocative element that brings the viewer into proximity with the pain of the protagonist, communicating and augmenting her martyred existence and confinement to the oppressive rules applied to the role of a Handmaid. This way, *The Handmaid's Tale* uses numerous layers of visual signals that stimulate the audience to catch the in-the-moment emotion while the salience, expressivity, and narrative context behind them fill the needed requirements for the viewer's congruent emotional response.



(Figure 6: 1x02, 10:24)

²⁵⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the virtual : movement, affect, sensation*, 3. print. ed., Durham: Duke University Press 2005, p. 46.

Apart from the complimentary emotional triggers provided by lighting, editing, composition, and set design, there are also more direct visual cues for empathy that on some level are to be found almost in every sequence or scene of the series. Such cues can be picked up from as little as the the body movement of June who has been schooled to maintain a posture of meekness and obedience; from her restrained reaction to the acts of humiliation and verbal assaults; from the enforced smile in Offred's conversations with her abusers; from her face expression when thinking about her daughter and husband; from June's inability to avenge her suffering; from the mise-en-scène and blocking that highlight the fact of imprisonment and inability to escape surveillance and control.

Such cues — articulated in the visual performance — are, of course, inseparable from the narrative context and other emotional cues, such as those elicited by the music score. The latter is also an important tool of the show that conveys and intensifies the mood and emotion of the scenes. Smith and Stadler note that it is especially the non-diegetic sound that plays a considerable role in making the viewer experience an intended emotion. The mere appearance of the non-diegetic music after its absence, says Smith, is a way to signal to the viewer that something important is occurring.²⁵⁹ He continues to affirm that the music is able to deliver an appropriate mood orientation, express the inner state of the character and induce a congruent emotion in the listener.²⁶⁰ Stadler adds that the non-dietetic music not only gives access to the character's perspective but also forces a shifting, seemingly enabling the viewer to vicariously experience an emotion as if from the point of view of the character.²⁶¹

The signature musical theme of *The Handmaid's Tale* is an atonal pitch-shifting sound that renders a dark and menacing atmosphere, which is expressive both of the situation and of the in-the-moment emotion of the protagonist, and at the same time evokes the congruent emotion in the viewer. In the episode 2x02, for example, such music fills the whole five and a half minutes of the scene in which June walks around the empty headquarters of *The Boston Globe*, a scene which has no dialogue and shows mostly June's face and her reactions to the things she sees around her. Starting at 19:00, there are only diegetic sounds of June's movements. Starting at 19:36 the non-diegetic music fades in, slowly increasing in volume and bleakness of its mood as the protagonist finds more and more dreadful evidences of the

²⁵⁹ Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, p. 91.

²⁶⁰ Jeff Smith, "Movie Music as Moving Music. Emotion, Cognition, and the Film Score", *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga/Greg M. Smith, Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, p. 154.

²⁶¹ Stadler, "Empathy in film", p. 319.

violence perpetrated inside these walls. The music first conveys June's caution and fear of the space itself, as it is empty, quiet and so large that one expects danger hiding in its far corners. Then, at 22:54 she notices several noose hanging from the ceiling at the same time as the melody introduces more high-pitched strings, conveying a sense of tragedy and deep sorrow, which is simultaneously mirrored in June's tearful eyes. At 32:50 she sees a wall with the holes left by bullets, at what obviously had been a mass execution of the newspaper's employees. In this scene of empathy, the two-note synthesized noise underlies the melancholic string melody producing a moan of pain and lamentation which is both the expression of June's inner state and an elicitor of our mimetic reaction to it. Moss's face expression, music, and the extended duration of the sequence all induce a congruent state of a palpable desolation what may be argued to be the complex process of emotional contagion, empathy, and central imagining.

Considering the aforementioned cinematic strategies of storytelling, it can be concluded that the show seeks to create an evocative and intense film experience and fill next to every scene with an emotional stimuli — a cinematic strategy that underscores the meaning and emotion, pulling the viewer's attention and giving the audience little opportunity to escape the atmosphere of the story. The set design, *mise-en-scène*, editing and camera movement all deliver expressive, tactile elements that maintain an appropriate mood and give volume to the image. Overall, the aforementioned techniques produce a tangible and realistic atmosphere of ominous beauty and of the slow-going routine in which Offred lives so that the viewer can imagine being in this world and apprehend it in a similar way like the Handmaid does. It can be argued that the experience of empathy that is cued by the aforementioned visual and acoustic means relies heavily on the mood and atmosphere that pull the viewer into a state of a vicarious experience of the perspective of the protagonist, and our congruent emotional state is stimulated predominantly by salience, realistic acting, and motor mimicry. Additionally, slow motion, long shots, sound, lighting and scoring all have a strong affective quality of eliciting emotional contagion that sends the viewer in a state of distress and other congruent emotions by saturating the image with layers of mood cues.

6.2 Face and close-up

A close-up shot is a powerful filmmaking technique able to intensify emotion and sense of identity of the viewer with the film character through proximity and salience, hence also invoking the corresponding empathy bias. A magnified image of the human face, specifically, allows to elicit a strong affective response by maximizing the impact of acting and demonstrated emotions, and particularly empathy is stimulated by the mechanism of emotional contagion, facial feedback, and affective mimicry.²⁶² Plantinga notes that we have a natural tendency to catch the emotions and moods of others when they are conveyed through facial expressions, and combined with other cinematic techniques like editing, framing and scoring, the close-up of a face creates a space for the viewer to immerse into the congruent state of the observed emotion. With the face being the most expressive medium of emotion and interior life of a character, its close-up has become “the soul”²⁶³ and the “keystone”²⁶⁴ of the cinema, says Jean Epstein.

By and large, it is certainly the soul and the landmark of *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale* which is told predominantly by means of signature formal tableaux, close, and extremely close shots of the characters' faces. The intention behind the prolific use of close-ups on June, according to the show's cinematographers, is putting the audience “almost uncomfortably close”²⁶⁵ to the protagonist, to unsettle them to the degree that is congruent with her own discomfort. Moreover, it is a way of giving the viewer a privileged access to the personal space of the protagonist and to her very soul, thus evoking the sense of profound intimacy, proximity, and familiarity. Technically this is achieved through the use of an ultra wide lens and at the same time placing the camera physically close to the face of the actress.²⁶⁶ Furthermore, the camera often shows June's face for a longer duration than is necessary to convey information or emotion. Such narratively excessive shots invite the viewer into scenes of empathy forcing us to linger in the moment and surrender to the process of emotional contagion.

²⁶² Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film”, p. 240.

²⁶³ Jean Epstein, Stuart Liebman, “Magnification and Other Writings”, *October*, Vol. 3, 1977, www.jstor.org/stable/778434, p. 9.

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁶⁵ “‘The Handmaid's Tale’ - How it achieved that creepy look and feel”, *Gold Derby*, 14.06.2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8VZRpb-8sY, 4.04.2020, 0:34.

²⁶⁶ Chris O'Falt, “‘The Handmaid's Tale’: Finding Lenses (and Cameras) to Create the Unfamiliar World of Gilead”, *IndieWire*, 22.06.2017, www.indiewire.com/2017/06/handmaids-tale-reed-morano-cinematography-1201845595/, 4.04.2020.

Together with a subtle and realistic acting, the scenes with June's close-ups are abundantly used to cue strong and congruent emotion as she is shown with restrained horror and quite obedience, stricken with grief and awaiting punishment, witnessing brutal trials and partaking in painful rituals. Remarkably, in such scenes of undergoing great distress, it is most likely that the viewer will catch and mirror the character's emotional state because of the salient presentation of character's reaction rather than by merely seeing the graphic demonstration of violence. The atmosphere of the series that is largely perceived by the viewers as overloaded with sadism and brutality is actually conveyed in circumvention of the display of the physical torture. Much more than the process of violence the series is interested in observing the effect it has on the victim.

Some of the most vivid examples of this are the scenes of the monthly ceremony, in which the camera prioritizes showing Offred's face rather than the mechanics of the process (1x01, 30:30-32:00; 1x05, 28:35-29:30; 2x10, 27:14-29:09). Other numerous scenes that involve a corporeal damage are staged in the same way. For instance, in the episode 1x04, after Offred is caught in an attempt to flee the Red Center, Aunts bring her back and chain to a bed. The following scene (42:50-44:34) consists of a sequence of close-up shots of Offred's face contorted with terror as she is awaiting a punishment (Figure 7). For almost a minute and a half the scene transfixes with the facial performance. Only in the last ten seconds of the scene does the actual punishment occur, whereas we do not see what exactly is happening to Offred's body. The camera only shows that an Aunt is raising her hand and in the next moment we are back to looking at the Handmaid's face as she cries out in pain. This way, we are put in the same position as the character who has a literal limited perspective in the scene because she is immobilized and lying on her stomach. Her expressive face is a salient source of affect, emotional contagion and empathy, because it not only expresses agony, suspense and vulnerability but also fully grabs the viewer's attention by scale and intensity. The performative force of the scene is further increased by the lighting that maximizes the expressivity of and the attention to June's bright blue eyes. Besides, it is also remarkable that the scene is obviously dedicated to the viewer's experience of suspense, tension, and empathy because the time is being devoted largely to the prolonged expectation of a bodily punishment rather than to the fact of its execution.



(Figure 7: 1x04, 44:21)

As can be seen in the aforementioned example, showing June's reaction rather than the corporeal details of the torture is an effective way of building a congruent tension and empathy, because the act of forcing us to look in the eyes of the martyr calls for our capacity to endure the torture ourselves. This is a distinctive visual strategy of the show that creates conditions for emotions to pour over the audience by means of acting and visceral cinematography. The might of the show's close-ups has had a particularly remarkable presentation in the episode 2x01. Starting at 02:44 we see Offred sitting in a van which is taking her to an unknown destination. For longer than one minute there is only Moss's face in the close-up that is being shown. She is agitated and is trying to compose herself, and again, is awaiting a development which is outside of her and our knowing or control. There is no dialogue or the voiceover, only the occasional diegetic tremble of a metal car barrier and the non-diegetic score that supplements the bleak atmosphere. The duration of the scene and the proximity to June's tangible fear not only elicits a congruent state of anxiety but also establishes the emotional orientation for the viewer which will be further intensified in the following sequence. The van stops and two policemen pull the protagonist aggressively on the outside. Amid the loud bark of police dogs and frantically flickering sirens, we see a scene of chaos and extreme agitation as two dozen Handmaids are being mustered by the policemen, muzzled, and led to the gallows. From 7:30 till 11:00, as the women stand quivering in front of the noose, the camera captures and prolongs the state of the extreme dread and through the extended duration, salience and proximity heightens the viewer's empathic response.

The camera pushes close to extremely close to show every bit of a physical expression of terror on Offred's face: the tears, the shudder, the convulsive movements, the tangible panic (Figure 8).

The overall sequence of the aforementioned events that formally consists of three scenes (because of the three locations) lasts seven minutes and has no spoken lines except for a short speech of Aunt Lydia at the end. For more than six minutes the viewers are expecting to see a punishment of an extreme force. It is a remarkably generous amount of time that a television program dedicates to a scene with no dialogue and only minimal plot development — instead there are minutes spent on looking into the eyes of the Handmaid. It is an unparalleled scene of empathy that shows that the imagery and the music score have an affective power even in the absence of the dialogue. Notably, this is one of the most violent and distressing scenes in the series, however, this emotive effect is achieved completely without the actual show of a bodily harm. Writing for *The Guardian*, Julia Raeside similarly notes that the emotional force of the scene lies in the silent expression of character's dread which infuses the audience with a lasting congruent tension and leaves them equally shuddered:

“As Offred joins the throng of crying, shaking women, a leather bridle covering half her face, we are forced again to look into the dehumanised eyes of women who think they are going to be slaughtered. It is more gruelling to watch than any number of ear-slicings or hand-burnings. Gilead rules not with fear, but with the abject terror of the removal of humanity. Those eyes are what I can't stand.”²⁶⁷



(Figure 8: 2x01, 9:50)

²⁶⁷ Julia Raeside, “The Handmaid's Tale recap: season 2, episode 1 – Offred discovers her fate”, *The Guardian*, 20.05.2018, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/may/20/the-handmaids-tale-recap-season-2-episode-1-offred-discovers-her-fate, 4.02.2020.

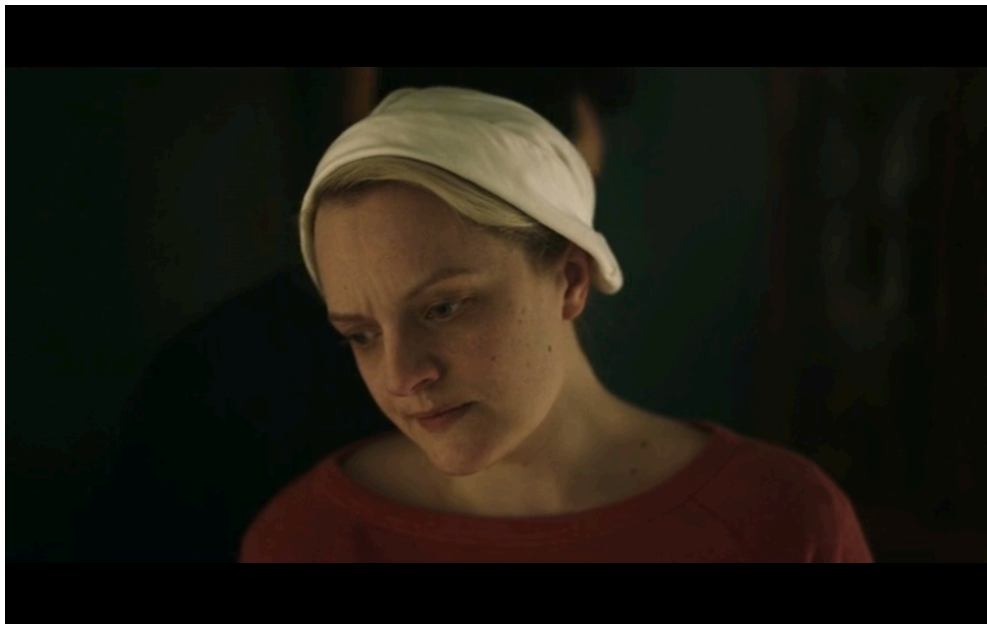
Proximity to the pain is a fundamental visual strategy of the show's cinematic language. The further evocative effect of the close-up shots is elicited when they are coupled with the increasingly decelerating motion — a combination of acting, directing and editing techniques that Coplan and Plantinga declare to be one of the most effective tools of releasing empathy.²⁶⁸ Both the slow motion and the progressively growing scale of the face beguile the viewer into a pre-conscious affective state of catching the emotion through the process of contagion and so leads us to share the in-the-moment emotion of the character. This is also the case in the aforementioned scene, when Offred, with her head in the noose, looks upward in the sky (09:25-09:33) — the time decelerates as if to mirror the slowing of the heartbeat, the ending of a life and the last moment before being pulled into the darkness.

On the other hand, steady head shots in the ordinary pace have a power of their own. In yet another recurring technique, *The Handmaid's Tale* places the protagonist in the middle (1x03, 03:35, 12:32; 40:36; 53:10) or on the edge of the frame (1x03, 13:32; 21:01; 22:00; 26:22; 40:25) creating signature static tableaux that either silently transmit emotion or intensify it together with the dialogue lines or contextual informational cues. Remarkable in this visual strategy is the aesthetic portraiture which has meta-references to religious iconography, paintings, and classic cinematic artworks.

In the episode 2x13, for instance, in the scene starting at 8:00 the Waterfords and Nick are meeting with the parents of his just executed young wife. They exchange condolences and the father apologizes for Eden's behavior. Offred observes silently and her reserved face expression communicates sorrow for Nick and for the girl whose only sin was reading the Bible and following it in her own understanding. When the conversation is over and the camera follows Nick as he walks past Offred, the camera stops the motion and shifts the focus onto showing the Handmaid close from the shoulders upward. At 8:25 Nick walks from the left to the middle of the frame and almost touches Offred's right shoulder. In this moment, Moss leans slightly in his direction to the left side of the frame. At 08:26 the camera captures a moment of an aesthetic, symbolic, and emotional significance: The resulting perspective merges foreground and background of the image making it look like Offred's head lies on Nick's right shoulder, suggesting that their bodies entangle in an ephemeral, consoling embrace (Figure 9). For six seconds (08:26-08:31) Moss maintains the posture. During this prolonged static close shot, the viewer is given time to ponder and share the emotional state

²⁶⁸ Coplan, "Catching Characters' Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film", pp. 18, 26., Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the human face on Film", pp. 249-250.

that fills the screen, whereas the visual style guides the emotive and symbolic apprehension. Offred's inconspicuous, imaginative touch is an intuitive gesture of love and desire to comfort a friend. Of course they are not allowed to show emotions for each other, and the impossibility of an open interaction intensifies the desolated mood of the moment. The viewer knows that Offred is sincerely sympathetic toward Eden, an innocent child who was raised and killed by the patriarchal religion; And following the context, the viewer also knows that together with compassion, Offred feels sorrow at the fact that her and Nick's baby might suffer the same tragic fate as Eden did.



(Figure 9: 2x13, 08:27)

On the cinematic level, the mood here is sustained by visual cues in acting, directing, lighting, framing, set design and costume. Moss's slightly bent head and her gaze directed downward bear a direct resemblance to the depiction of saints in icon paintings. Together with the red dress and the bonnet covering her hair, the image of Offred strengthens the metaphorical allusion to Christianity and the Biblical references to sin, martyrdom, Mary Magdalene and the divine conception of a baby in detachment from its father, something that is a parallel to Offred's pregnancy. Furthermore, the image gains in expressivity through the light and color scheme. Dressed in red and white, Offred is the only bright object in the frame which stands out against the dark monochrome background. Her presence is thus made salient by the proximity to the camera, the color contrast and duration of the tableau, which altogether keeps

the viewer's attention and engagement with the scene and its atmosphere, giving one time to undergo the emotions shared with the protagonist.

In many of the episodes and scenes the interplay of darkness and light is used to add evocativeness to the image and intensify the dramatic effect of a close-up, while also cuing an aesthetic experience written into the film's materiality. An illustrative example of how this relates to the empathic experience can be discussed in reference to the episode 1x03, in which Offred is interrogated as a follow-up to the arrest of Ofglen. Starting at 26:10 (till 32:32) the scene is set in a spacious living room of the Waterford's house. The low-key lighting permeates the space giving it a menacing feel of a prison cell. The only source of light is coming from the three windows, albeit its function is to highlight the darkness rather than to give objects a better visibility. The three persons in the scene — Offred, Aunt Lydia and the investigator — are placed against the light, which allows the camera to play with their shapes and silhouettes in the frame. While the scene is mostly static with only minimal movement, the shadowplay brings dynamics to the scene and activates the viewer's attention avoiding the loss of focus. After the initial wide shot the camera moves closer to the protagonist so that the intimidating tension of the questioning is staged to be reflected fully on her face (Figure 10).



(Figure 10: 1x03, 28:40)

Since Ofglen disappeared right after telling Offred about the Mayday, she and the audience expect the worst to come out of this questioning as Offred might be implicated in the resistance movement. First we are proven to be correct, as Aunt Lydia starts the meeting with

a charge of an electric prod. However, it turns out to be just a method of encouraging sincere answers rather than a premature penalizing. While the following questions are asked and answered, the camera almost never changes position. From 26:54 the viewer is fully concentrated on Moss's face while her restrained fear becomes more and more palpable and the lack of functional illumination delivers an additional unnerving effect. While the lighting technique sets the mood and disposition for catching the in-the-moment emotion, the empathy is also driven by the gravity of the narrative conflict and the visual proximity to its victim.

In general, the emotional work on the part of the viewer in this sequence can be argued to consist of several processes: Firstly, the viewer is seamlessly forced to share the timing of affect and the emotional state of Offred on the narrative level, as this plot development is as sudden for us as it is for her. The congruent state of knowledge thus transfers the viewer into the congruent emotional state that the protagonist is evidently experiencing. As we don't know more than Offred does, we depend completely on her perspective to assess the event and react to it. Secondly, here we can speak about emotional contagion and mimicry as a result of observing Moss's facial expression, catching her slightly bated breath and careful pauses she makes while answering. The camera makes sure to convey the physical sensation of dread: going in and out of focus reflecting Offred's silent panic, catching the sweat on her skin, a twitch in the eye and active control of the facial muscles. Altogether, the mimetic force of the subtle fear presented in extreme proximity creates a similar physical tension in the viewer. Thirdly, the audience is most likely to also experience sympathy and concern as part of a central imagining, because, as an observer, the viewer understands the high stakes of the event and a risk to the character's well-being. Fourthly, as the narrative conventions of the show have been established up to this point and we have been shown brutal consequences of the Gileadean treatment of its enemies, the viewer is likely to experience empathy with the protagonist in this scene by sharing Offred's fear of a probable punishment. Having such a premonition about the consequences of plot points is part of the mechanism of empathy that is triggered by the learning bias, i.e. all the previous violent acts nurture the accumulating suspense and fear of the future possible brutalities. In this process identification may also play a role, because the viewer's mental schema invokes a familiar model of personal physical or mental reaction to the suffering of the protagonist, i.e. the viewer might feel especially tense and disturbed in the scene of the interrogation, because he or she has learnt that the punishment of the character will be actually experienced by them in the real world, and in this moment their subjectivity is quite entangled with the subjectivity of the character.

As the interrogation goes on, it becomes clear that contrary to our expectation, Gilead is investigating Ofglen as a gender-traitor. This brings both Offred and the viewer a moment of relief, since Offred can't be blamed for this. However, then the Handmaid confirms that she knew Ofglen was homosexual. This reverses the situation once again, because failing to report that information is a punishable offense. As the camera shows Moss's face extremely close, we see the exact moment that Offred feels relieved enough to proclaim that she didn't report on Emily because she is her friend. From here, Offred feels empowered and speaks bravely, feeling joy at the possibility to show Gilead that friendship still exists no matter how they try to eradicate it. From 31:27 the visual style adds symbolic and aesthetic volume to illuminating the goodness of her character against the oppressor's vice. At 31:27 Moss is seen extremely close on the right side of the frame. From the window on the left side, a thick long streak of a 'god ray' pierces the darkness and creates a direct line connecting to her face. The chiaroscuro lighting intensifies the dramatic tone, and the overall visual style frames a portrait that invokes simultaneously an aesthetic pleasure and a spiritual imagery: a martyr confronting the oppressor, a saint persecuted by a hypocritical religion. Reinforcing the parallel even more, Offred recites a verse from the Bible.

Overall, the camera showing so persistently and continuously the magnified image of Moss's face creates an aesthetic experience on its own. The symbolism, framing technique, affectivity of this visual style and the mere scale of its use alludes strongly to Carl Dreyer's *The Passions of Joan of Arc*. Just as in the classic film which is fundamentally a series of facial tableaux shot against the plain background, in *The Handmaid's Tale* the face plays the same role, that is one of a landscape on which the inner drama is taking place. Some of the visual similarities between the presentation of Joan of Arc and Offred is the slightly bowed head with a sombre, quite look (Figure 11); Eyes looking upwards whether in a moment of inner turmoil (Figure 12) or as a visual expression of precariousness in the world that overpowers her (Figure 13); Prolonged shots dwelling on the eyes as the gaze is fixed on one point outside of the frame (Figure 14); A clear view of the face with no apparent make-up and the absence of hair (hiding them under a bonnet while Joan of Arc's hair is cut completely).

Apart from that, a striking similarity with Dreyer's style is achieved by framing Moss's close-ups against the monochrome or very minimalistic background either on a side of a frame (Figure 15) or in the lower thirds (Figure 16) which is used partially as stylistic tool of a cinematic aesthetic and partially as a way to illustrate the marginalization and precariousness, the sense of a forced displacement and fragile position in the fundamentalist world.



(Figure 11: 2x04, 35:56)



(Figure 12: 1x03, 12:30)



(Figure 13: 2x04, 54:28)



(Figure 14: 2x12, 44:48)



(Figure 15: 2x01, 38:00)



(Figure 16: 2x01, 38:46)

The parallelism between the visual presentation of June and Joan of Arc is an undercurrent that gives an additional emotional force to the formal portraiture of the series. The viewers familiar with the Dreyer's silent masterpiece receive yet another stimulus to apply additional schemas to the interpretation of the image of a face, because such a symbolic allusion allow us to transfer already experienced emotions from different artworks to the present one.

Thus, reading through the layers of information encoded in the Handmaid's persona and witnessing her afflictions under the patriarchal rule, we not only feel her pain but also a shadow of sympathy and compassion for the innocent young martyr played by Maria Falconetti. But even more, just as there is a constant ephemeral presence of the Maid of Orléans in the carefully framed close-up shots of the Handmaid, there is a concurrent flow of associations with religious practices, state laws and historical precedents that make June's suffering so relatable and affective. The thin line between the Atwood's speculation and today's reality is certainly yet another factor that makes the audience endure the vicarious presence in Gilead. In the act of submitting ourselves to the torment of *The Handmaid's Tale*, we can acknowledge an aptitude of the cinematic medium to not only entertain but also challenge us. This is the case with the experience of spectatorship of the *Hulu* adaptation which can be summarized by the observation that Alan Sepinwall made in reference to the series: "Sometimes, both artist and audience have to suffer for great art."²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ Sepinwall, "Did 'Handmaid's Tale' Season 2 Finale Just Take Down the Series?"

7. Conclusion

Having analyzed the empathy-inducing strategies of *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale* it becomes apparent that it is not only the scope of empathy cues that place the viewer in the concurrent emotional state with the main character, but also the fact of their layering on top of each other that ensures an intensive empathic effect that is maintained in each episode throughout the two seasons. During a shot as simple as a facial close-up, for instance, in which we see a desolated Handmaid, we are undergoing a series of concurrent cognitive and affective processes that are prompted by the combination of narrative and cinematic techniques. The facial expression communicates the emotion (for instance, of fear) to which the viewer usually responds with fear, as the rule of emotional contagion and facial mimicry states. That alone is enough to call it an empathic experience, because even the lighter form of sharing the other's feeling is considered to be empathy. However, the *Hulu* adaptation uses a heavy arsenal of auxiliary methods that force a stronger level of empathy with the character.

The layering of the concurrent forces of storytelling makes sure that the audience receive and respond to a variety of emotional stimuli. Using the example with the facial close-up, we can see that empathy is not only a result of looking at the visual expression of fear, but also it is the positive affective disposition and allegiance toward June that prompts us to be distressed together with her. The grasp of the narrative context places us in the same kind of anguish, because just as June so do we know what significance the distressing event has for her. The identification with June's goals and the trajectory of her desires means that we are similarly stressed by the obstacle to her inner peace. The exposure to her narrative perspective and the inner monologue ensures that we understand her mentality and know exactly what she is feeling and thinking — an act of cinematic mind-reading for the viewer that leads us to vicariously undergo the same or very similar emotional state of that which we see on the outside. The sense of familiarity with June that we have developed with time further ensures the empathic response to her woeful state. The ability to see the parallels of the Gileadean treatment of June in the real world allows the bias of similarity to catch June's desolation and mirror it through the personal subjective experience. The proximity to the expression of pain on the screen renders the emotion tangible and the salience of the presentation also increases the capacity for actually feeling what June is feeling. Apart from that, there are also supplementary emotional cues in the music score and visual style that express and evoke

certain mood and atmosphere which immerse us into the emotional landscape of June's existence.

Such layering of the empathy-inducing techniques is a predominant strategy of *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale* that ensures not only the occurrence of empathy but also its intensity. Moreover, the scope of the shots, sequences and scenes that elicit empathy, emotional contagion, and facial mimicry as well as the long duration of scenes of empathy validate the claim that the emotional congruence is a frequent and continuous experience of the viewer in the act of spectatorship of the series.

The numerous storytelling techniques in the *Hulu* adaptation that elicit empathy have been found both on the narrative and the cinematic level. Drawing on the undertaken analysis it can be concluded that the viewer's empathic response is as result of both cognitive and affective processes. In many cases it could be observed that the narrative strategies are predominantly eliciting empathy through cognitive processes and the cinematic techniques tend to release foremost an affective response. Specifically, the former relies on the viewer's categorization and apprehension of the narrative context, plot, main character's goals, and understanding of the significance of the events for her. The affective disposition toward the protagonist is partially based on the viewer's appraisal of the character's persona, which requires one to evaluate and find shared qualities in the other. Such techniques as character writing, the first-person narration and the limited perspective of the Handmaid also become an effective tool of empathy because they deepen and extend our understanding of June's feelings and desires, which is crucial for occurrence of our concurrent emotion. The bias of similarity, familiarity and past experience seem to dominate the mechanisms behind the empathic response to the narrative techniques.

The cinematic techniques, of which predominantly visual ones were the object of the study, heavily rely on other processes. The mood and atmosphere that is rendered through color, framing, set design, slow motion and duration of the visually enticing scenes does not require the viewer to evaluate the significance of the moment as much as it aims at immersing the audience into the spatio-temporal materiality of the diegetic universe. The visual and acoustic elements such as volumetric lighting, heavy air and the music score may not elicit empathy by themselves, but they give the fictional universe volume and realism, thus inviting the viewer to vicariously experience being inside of the image. With that foundation, facial close-ups shown in slow motion achieve the noted hypnotizing effect and hold the viewer's gaze resulting in textbook scenes of empathy. Because the cinematic level is concerned

predominantly with the visual cues, it has been noted that the empathic response to visual presentation of the protagonist's emotions is a part of a complex process that includes a variety of concurrent emotions and processes such as sympathy, frustration, saturation, emotional contagion and facial mimicry. The bias of proximity and salience are most pronounced on the cinematic level.

The noticeable variety of the ways in which the viewer's emotional congruence is stirred in the act of film spectatorship offers a valuable commentary to the theoretical discussions of mechanisms behind the cinematic empathy. We can conclude that the acceptance of varied theories allows to see a big picture that explains the nature of empathy, because it can be elicited in a large number of ways. We have seen that identification plays a role in some instances more than in others, that a vicarious experience of the character's perspective is accentuated in some plot points, but not in all of them. Similarly, Plantinga's notions of allegiance and duration are certainly at play in many cases, but there are also many other elements that a film can use to force the viewer to feel as the character does. This is why the concept of empathy bias is a helpful additional instrument in finding a wide spectrum of empathy cues and understanding why they affect us.

Having identified that the affective congruence is an important aspect of *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale*, we can further define what role empathy has in the storytelling and the viewer's experience of interaction with the series. The analysis suggests that empathy has a leading role in evoking a range of negative emotions such as fear, distress, tension, anxiety and frustration. Because these emotions dominate the dystopian plot of the series, they also are the fundamental elements of the viewer's experience. And since these emotions are cued by a large variety of techniques, empathy is designed to occur frequently in the act of spectatorship. The large amount of obstacles in the journey of the protagonist is yet another factor of maintaining the affective congruence of the viewer. An important note in this regard is that the congruent emotions are inflicted on the audience through the act of central imagining, that is to say, they are channeled through the subjectivity and individual perspective of the character. This is why the fear that the audience comes to experience is not a fear *for* the main character but a concurrent state of fear *with* her. The ability to observe the life of the character from the outside which was taken as a rule by Noël Carroll does not hold true in the case of the *Hulu* adaptation. The greater knowledge about the protagonist and the world in which she is held captive is being withheld from the view of a non-diegetic outsider. From this ensues the lack of foreshadowing of the coming acts of violence, which makes it

possible for the viewer to share the timing of affect completely with the protagonist and therefore also respond with a stronger affective congruence to her suffering.

It can be concluded that in contrast with conventional TV content that foregrounds entertainment through easy and dynamic storytelling that is generally aimed to distract the viewers from the daily routine, *The Handmaid's Tale's* approach is targeted in the opposing direction, defying the comfort of escapism. The show presents numerous emotional challenges to the audience, inducing fright by probability of the shown horrors and suggesting that the Atwood's speculation is not far from the reality we live in. Because empathy itself is not an emotion but an emotional process, this study shows why the audience call the *Hulu* adaptation the scariest series on television right now — because the distress one comes to experience is that of being inside the dystopia. Terror is the predominant emotion in Gilead, and as we surrender to the emotional journey of the series, we are being exposed to and immersed in the very torments and pain of the oppressed.

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Abstract

This master's thesis explores a fundamental, yet understudied phenomenon of cinematic empathy. It uses a pluralistic approach, combining academic discussions of film theory and film psychology with empirical research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience. The theoretical part of the thesis explains the problematic nature of the notion of empathy, illuminates the related discord in terminology, discusses the role of *identification* and *empathy bias*, and presents an overview of *elicitors* and *conditioners* of the viewer's empathic response to emotions of film characters.

The practical part of the study provides examples of empathy-inducing strategies in the *Hulu* series *The Handmaid's Tale*. The analysis is largely based on the personal interpretation of the show's recurring and dominant empathy cues and is further supported by theoretical material and feedback from the viewers sourced from various media outlets.

The analysis suggests that the *Hulu* adaptation of the Atwood's dystopia shapes the viewer's emotional journey by a large scope of concurrent empathy cues, which ensures a frequent and intensive empathic experience. Specifically, empathy has a leading role in evoking a range of negative emotions such as fear, distress, tension, anxiety and frustration which occur in response to the observation of affective states of the protagonist Offred/June. Since her suffering dominates the dystopian plot of the series, it is also the fundamental element of the viewer's experience. It materializes primarily through the obstruction of goals and desires of the protagonist that the viewers share and through the salient presentation of Offred's mental and physical affliction which becomes tangible and contagious. Also the narrative perspective and access to the inner life of the protagonist let the audience not only catch but also mirror her emotions through the act of *central imagining*, i.e. one feels an imaginative presence inside the dystopian Gilead. This is why the distress of the audience is not a result of feeling *for* the main character but a congruent state of feeling *with* her.

Overall, this thesis provides a possible blueprint for the analysis of empathy cues in film and television storytelling, and offers an explanation of mechanisms behind the viewer's empathic experience. In doing so, this research contributes to the overall media literacy, while also commencing a discussion of the *Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale*, which, as a relatively new series, has not yet gotten much attention in academic studies.

Abstract (German)

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht ein grundlegendes, aber wenig erforschtes filmisches Phänomen - Empathie mit Filmfiguren. Basierend auf einem pluralistischen Ansatz, greift die Arbeit verschiedene Erkenntnisse auf, sowohl solche der Filmtheorie und -psychologie als auch der empirischen Forschung in der kognitiven Psychologie und den Neurowissenschaften. Der theoretische Teil der Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Problematik der Begriffsdefinition von *Empathie*, beleuchtet die damit verbundene Uneindeutigkeit in der Terminologie, diskutiert die Rolle von *identification* und *empathy bias* und gibt einen Überblick über Auslöser von empathischen Reaktionen des Betrachters auf Emotionen von Filmfiguren.

Der praktische Teil der Studie enthält Beispiele für Strategien, Empathie hervorzurufen, am Beispiel der Hulu-Serie *The Handmaid's Tale* (*Der Report der Magd*). Die Analyse basiert größtenteils auf der persönlichen Interpretation der wiederkehrenden und dominanten Empathie-Auslöser in der Serie und wird durch theoretisches Material und Zuseher-Feedback aus verschiedenen Medien unterstützt.

Die Analyse legt nahe, dass die TV-Version der Atwood-Dystopie die emotionale Reise des Betrachters durch eine Vielzahl von gleichzeitigen Empathie-Auslösern prägt, welche eine häufige und intensive empathische Erfahrung hervorrufen. Hier ist insbesondere einer Reihe negativer Emotionen hervorzuheben, wie z.B. Angst, Bedrängnis, Spannung und Frustration, die als Reaktion auf die Beobachtung affektiver Zustände der Protagonistin Offred/June auftreten. Da ihr Leiden die Handlung der Serie dominiert, ist dies auch die Basis für die Erfahrung des Betrachters. Dies materialisiert sich hauptsächlich durch die Behinderung von Zielen und Wünschen der Protagonistin, die die Zuschauer teilen, und wird durch die hervorstechende Darstellung der seelischen und körperlichen Schmerzen greifbar. Auch die narrative Perspektive und der Zugang zum Innenleben der Protagonistin erlauben dem Publikum ihre Emotionen zu erfassen und widerzuspiegeln. Deshalb ist die Spannung des Publikums nicht das Ergebnis des Mitgefühls, sondern des kongruenten Gefühlszustandes.

Insgesamt bietet diese Arbeit eine mögliche Vorlage für die Analyse von Empathie im Film- und Fernseh-Storytelling und eine Erklärung der Mechanismen, die hinter der empathischen Erfahrung des Betrachters stehen. Auf diese Weise trägt diese Forschung zur allgemeinen Medienkompetenz bei und startet gleichzeitig eine Diskussion über *The Handmaid's Tale*, die als relativ neue Serie in akademischen Studien bisher noch nicht viel Beachtung gefunden hat.