

## Representing Extremity: Adaptation as Working Through

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My perspective and current research explores cinematic adaptation and the representation of traumatic experience in order to consider the success or failure of adaptation in situations where the original literary work concerns an experience of extremity. Working off and proceeding from the figure of the impossibility of representation in the writing of trauma (original text), my work considers how the fundamental impasse that characterizes so much writing about trauma adapts to the cinematic form and how its articulation is managed in the transition from writing to the image. In order to explore the phenomenon more specifically, I consider the narrative memoir in particular since this form of trauma writing is considerably less mediated in terms of the representation of extreme experience than fictional narrative. At the same time, however, it is the mode of literary writing that is least palatable to audiences for commercial dissemination, making the adaptation of the trauma narrative difficult in terms of producing a successfully marketable film.

While some work on adaptation and adaptation studies is grounded in media analysis and an easy reliance on the commonplace notion that a copy is always secondary to the thing it derives from (its origin), there are numerous theorists who engage with this presumption on a more complex and multivalent level. Even in such seminal analyses as Geoffrey Wagner's *The Novel and the Cinema*, where the author presents a tripartite theory of adaptation as transposition, commentary, or analogy, there is an understanding of revision that moves beyond an understanding of cinematic adaptation as simple copying. Wagner's extended study focuses on three major levels of adaptation, each of them based on an assumption of fidelity (or not) to an original source. From his musings on adaptation as transposition, commentary, or analogy, one clearly sees the origin-centric (as it were) nature of the theory as he endeavors to describe varying degrees of adaptation in relation to how accurately they

rearticulate the origin text.

Malgorzata Marciniak also engages with the question of adaptation in a more complex manner as she explores the attraction that audiences have to adapted films. In her essay “The Appeal of Literature-to-Film Adaptations,” Marciniak argues that adaptation is, in and of itself, a form of creative interpretation and that defining it merely in terms of fidelity is too limiting, preferring instead to theorize adaptation in terms of intertextuality and reception rather than fidelity. Intertextual creations necessarily imply the existence of precursors, though, even if the relation to them is not necessarily one of faithfulness and conformity. Similarly, Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation is a means of bringing tension between two poles: adaptation takes place in what she calls the “simple act of almost but not quite repeating, in the revisiting of a theme with variations.” Like Marciniak, who sees adaptation as a mode of analysis that encounters and excavates latent material in order to create intertextual engagements that “blur the boundaries between different media,” Hutcheon’s notion of adaptation posits a strong relation between the origin and the copy. Thus, in the end and despite these approaches that both complicate and render problematic our understanding of adaptation, the condition of possibility for the modes of adaptation they envision still rely on the positing of a stable and unified origin.

In order to proceed toward a counter-narrative that will open on to a different theory of adaptation and another notion of origin, a lost origin of sorts, I would like to open on to a different ground: 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy and the work of Walter Benjamin. Given the fraught relation in the experience of trauma to the event itself—that is, to an *original experience*—that might or might not be represented, either in the very consciousness or understanding of the survivor or in any sort of literary or cinematic text that he/she/they might endeavor to produce as a means of working through, my aim is to ground this work on adaptation and the possibility of representing traumatic experience within a philosophically-inflected meditation on the nature of the origin or an original text

and the experiences, events, or copies that might be engendered in relation to it and as a rearticulation of it. In the context of literature-to-film adaptation, theaporetic economy the experience of extremity is seen most readily in trauma narratives, particularly in the adaptation of non-fictional testimonial memoir. And, while one would understandably presume that the most successful mode of cinematic adaptation for trauma autobiography would be the documentary or personal narrative form, it is, paradoxically, often in fictional dramatic cinema where the most evocative adaptations emerge. I would like to discuss this perspective in order to further consider the exigencies of cinematic adaptation and the experience of extremity.