

Negotiating an Approach to Trauma: where Visual Media and Literature Diverge

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This article aims to uncover and assess some of the most prominent techniques used in the contemporary portrayal of trauma, by analyzing the works of Hanya Yanagihara, Koen Tachelet and Ivo van Hove for the novel *A Little Life* and its stage adaptation. This case study is particularly complex thanks to the stage adaptation being itself adapted in turn, for streaming platform distribution. The paper shows each medium's own strengths when it comes to the challenge of accurately portraying the broken psyche of a traumatized individual, as well as highlighting where and how the adaptation is forced to diverge formally from its literary counterpart, in order to create a powerful depiction of the same subject. Close reading is used in order to wholly assess each of the works, both individually, and comparatively. Finally, the article highlights how both visual media and written media can create impactful representations of trauma, so long as each form acknowledges and maximizes its own strengths and makes full use of its range of technical possibilities, adapting the visual where it cannot fully replicate the original text.

In Linda Hutcheon's words, adapting a work means "transcoding into a different set of conventions" (2006: 33). Starting from this point of view, this paper seeks to analyze the processes utilized in transcoding Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 novel *A Little Life* into the 2018 Dutch play *Een Klein Leven*, adapted by Koen Tachelet and directed by Ivo van Hove. The aim is to uncover and assess the different ways of portraying trauma when using different mediums, ranging from writing to performance and filming, and all the tools utilized with each form. As the play has been made accessible to the broader audience by means of an officially filmed and streamed version distributed by ITALive, it thus presents itself as a more complex case study, wherein the aforementioned transcoding happens twice, since it first must be turned from novel to stage play, and then also from stage play to the filmed version for streaming, which follows the usual conventions of filmmaking (camera work, editing etc.).

Julie Sanders explains that "any exploration of intertextuality and its specific manifestation in the forms of adaptation and appropriation is inevitably interested in how art creates art, or how literature is made by literature" (2015: 1). This is particularly relevant in the case of novels which undergo the adaptation processes necessary for becoming stage plays, as this process begins first and foremost by going from one form of written work to another, in order to produce the screenplay. As John Perry explains, "all literature deals with the communication of words. However, the narrative and dramatic forms differ essentially in the use of language" (1968: 1313), not to mention that "playwriting demands an economy of expression" (1313). The screenplay is always written with the intention of being read aloud, that is, performed. This means, of course, that the adapter cannot use the same techniques available to the author, and must therefore become creative when it comes to rendering parts of the work, so as not to lose certain aspects

that cannot be directly expressed in the spoken form.

When performing the screenplay, the actors add their own contributions to the finite product, among which one can count the tone, gestures, movements, body language, expressions and so on, which, as highlighted by Hutcheon, are not included in the actual text of the script (2006: 39). This means, therefore, that the actors themselves add another new layer of creativity, helping to shape the skeleton which is the screenplay. Then follows the contribution of the cameramen for the streaming of the play, alongside the editing and executive decisions regarding what and how to show, and maybe even more importantly what *not* to show. It thus becomes clear that the transformation that the original suffers in order to be adapted is manifold, and it happens at almost every level of creation, ranging from narration, to acting, to filming and producing.

The theme of Yanagihara and van Hove's works is trauma. Cathy Caruth suggests that the reason why trauma has become such an ever-present topic of discussion is because "it brings us to the limits of our understanding" (1995: 4). It stands then to reason that traumatic experiences so obscure that they defy a simple understanding would naturally call for a plethora of literary artifices in order to comprise a vivid representation of these things which are unspeakable in words. For this reason, symbolism becomes the main technique for the authors of trauma novels (Granofsky, 1995: 5). As one of the leading contemporary trauma authors, Yanagihara also utilizes a multitude of these narrative artifices and techniques in order to portray the broken psyche of the novel's protagonist, Jude, counting among those not only symbolism, but also disjointed timelines which go back and forth from past to present, allegory, and flashbacks reminiscent of PTSD symptoms, where something in the prose will trigger the protagonist and launch an episode from his past, presented to the reader as if Jude himself was reliving it in his mind, but more than anything, in his body. These are literary depictions of what Caruth terms as the belatedness of trauma, "its refusal to be simply located, its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (1995: 9).

As Perry explains, devices such as imagery and symbolism do not contribute to the work of the playwright, whose only tools are dialogue and movement (1968: 1313). Therefore, all of these techniques which represent strengths and innovations for the novel, actually make the adaptation process become more challenging, as the techniques available to primarily visual media differ vastly from those of media intended to be read.

Hutcheon states that "a novel, in order to be dramatized, has to be distilled, reduced in size, and thus, inevitably, complexity" (2006: 36). Yet the complexity can be compensated through the use of media and mode specific outlets, which are not available in the writing of a novel. Instances of these are the gestures and performances of the actors, the score, the lighting, or, in the case of films, the editing itself. Elsewhere Hutcheon highlights that "film clearly has resources that the stage can never have: the power of the close-up that gives the 'microdrama of the human countenance' and the separate soundtracks of film that permit voice-overs, music, and the nonvocal to intermingle" (2004: 110). As stated previously, van Hove's streamed adaptation is unique, as it combines the conventions of the play with those of the film, which allows, in theory, for the maximization of all medium specific strengths, in order to create the most complex finite product, since, as Hutcheon points out, the cinematic film has some advantages where the stage represents a constriction, "with the aid of the mediating camera, [that] can both direct and expand the possibilities of perception." (2006: 43).

It is with these medium specific outlets that the play manages to evoke and reconstruct in its own way the pervasiveness of trauma, as well as some of its symptoms, without using the

same artifices as the novel does, but creating its own way of defying genre in order to accurately portray the experience of trauma. In the first scene, where Jude harms himself, the others are seen around the scene doing their own tasks, unaware or blissfully oblivious of Jude, suggesting that they are in fact elsewhere, that the daily life continues uninterrupted in spite of the ongoing struggles of the protagonist. At the same time, Harrold is delivering a monologue about how he first met Jude, offering the spectator more insight into Jude's past, through Harrold's perception of the situation (van Hove, 2018: 19:40:00 – 22:00:00). Another instance happens at the 00:26:19 minute mark, when Jude is singing to Harrold, and as he sings the viewer can see Brother Luke's figure slowly creeping in from the background, as if suggestive of it emerging from Jude's depths of mind, like the trigger of a flashback. And yet another way of depicting the traumatic flashback is at the half hour mark, where the cameras effectively show a "dance" between the past and the present, as Jude talks to Harrold, but the conversation is interrupted by past conversations with Brother Luke. This particular scene sees the cameras switching aggressively from one side of the scene, Harrold's side, to Luke's side on the opposite end, with Jude stuck straight in the middle.

A more direct approach can be seen in the case of the "hyenas", one of the most prominent symbols used in the novel, where Jude frequently mentions them when his struggles and symptoms worsen, as a way of referring to the idea of a trigger for lack of knowledge of what he is experiencing. At the 2 hour and 40 minutes mark, Ana narrates "then come the hyenas", which is followed quickly by Jude's monologue where he describes the hyenas which have multiplied since he started having sex with Willem, launching into a full description of how they circle him in the savanna, suggesting that the savanna would be Jude's mind, while the camera circles him and shows him as if lurking around Jude, imitating the hyenas. The soundtrack is cleverly used to add actual hyena howls, which grow in intensity as the scene goes on, intensifying the tension, and only stop once Jude caves in despite attempts at resisting, and commits the act of self-harm by burning himself (van Hove, 2018: 2:40:00 – 2:42:33).

Sanders explains that adaptation involves an interpretative act, as the text is moved either generically or modally (or both) (2015: 3), which can be seen when comparing the original with the adaptation, when the differences become clear and can be traced back to interpretations pertaining as to what was considered by the adapters to be indispensable in telling the story and what was not. In certain cases, as she explains, this manifests as a revision of the original point of view, by voicing what the original silences (Sanders, 2015: 23). One striking example of this is seen in van Hove's play in the case of Ana's character. In Yanagihara's text, Ana is an episodic character who only appears in a few of the explanatory flashback chapters which depict Jude's childhood and his brief interactions with her as his social worker. This is because at the present time of the story Ana is dead, and can therefore only appear through these flashbacks which are meant to show the reader that there was at some point someone who did try to teach Jude how to overcome his trauma. It is then left to the reader's interpretation to decide how impactful her character was in the psychological development of the protagonist. The play, however, chooses to emphasize Ana's importance in Jude's journey, by having her almost constantly appear on stage as a figment of Jude's imagination in the battle between his instinct of locking his trauma away, that is, repressing it, and Ana's urging him to open up and allow himself to be seen and heard by those closest around him, his support system. This is used to show how echoes of the past reverberate in the traumatized individual's psyche even in the present, showing the tremendous impact of one singular instance of positive reinforcement. She is there, however, even when Jude is not implied to be thinking about her;

she is a constant presence watching him, only visible to the audience, as Jude goes through his journey and makes tentative steps towards recovery (van Hove, 2018: 2:05:00; 2:18:30). And, moreover, she is elevated not only to the rank of symbol, but also that of narrator, as she fills in the audience with information about events which are skipped in the performance (van Hove, 2018: 2:50:00), including ones of utmost importance for the plot and story, such as the description of Jude's suicide (van Hove, 2018: 3:38:28 – 3:41:00).

Marie-Laure Ryan affirms that “if we accept the possibility of narrativity in drama (...) the presence of a narrator is no longer a necessary condition” (1992: 368), yet van Hove's play makes constant use of the narrator, not only through the character of Ana, who although serves as the main narrator, as stated above, but who is also at times supplemented through other characters, such as Harold (2018: 3:41:00) or Willem (2018: 3:25:00). One explanation for this might be the novel's very large length of over 830 pages, which cannot wholly be replicated on the stage (or screen), even considering the play's exceptionally long runtime of over four hours. Therefore, the classical instrument of a narrator becomes an indispensable tool in the act of storytelling. Yet another reason for this could be to have a more well-rounded approach on how Jude is seen by his friends, how his trauma affects the lives of those around him, which is an important aspect and theme of the original text of the novel.

It is also important to highlight the scenes where the narrator is used, as stated above. The most relevant instances are Jude's suicide and Willem's death in the car crash, whose logistics were more likely than not difficult to represent on stage because of their nature. This is especially true in the case of the car crash scene which is brutal and much too dynamic to be properly replicated within the constraints of the stage: “At a large intersection, I don't see the truck coming at us. By the time I feel the crunch, I am already being ejected into the air.” (Willem narrating his death, van Hove, 2018: 2:35:11 – 2:35:40).

However, in Ryan's use of narrativity the concept is not limited to the narrator. She explains that the narrative text must create a world populated with characters, who must undergo changes of state caused by physical events, and, finally, the text must permit a coherent network which retraces events, links, and casual reactions (1992: 371). Following this description, wherein the “text” becomes the play performed, one can then assess in which of Ryan's classifications the work belongs. In the case of the original text of the novel, the assessment is clear and straightforward – complex narrativity:

In the complex mode, narrative structures appear on both the macro and the micro levels, and a relative balance is achieved between the two levels. The micro narratives do not create their own semantic universe, but expand the universe of the main plot. They may consist of background information on newly introduced characters, of subplots involving secondary characters, of anecdotes demonstrating the personality traits of the main character, or of relatively self-contained episodes bearing a crucial influence on their mental development. (Ryan, 1992: 372-3)

At other times the novel also falls into the scope of the proliferating narrativity, which is different from the complex one in the sense that the balance of the micro to macro levels is not maintained, with the micro level becoming invasive and monopolizing (Ryan, 1992: 373-4). Examples of this include episodes about Malcom's and JB's personal lives, particularly during JB's brief departure from the group. In van Hove's adaptation, however, the micro levels are almost entirely wiped from the story. Julia does not only not make an appearance, but she is

not even so much as mentioned by name, making it appear as if she does not exist at all. The only information that the audience receives about Malcom is very brief and happens in the first scene, when he speaks about his identity, resuming what was an entire character arc in the novel to a few lines which serve rather as an introduction in the play. JB's story is the most explored one, but in the larger context of the play that is still a minimal amount of exploration, with the episode of the gallery argument between JB and Jude being almost entirely glossed over, as opposed to its ample novelistic depiction.

The scene where JB mocks Jude's walk is also minimally explored on stage, which makes it lack the force it originally had in the novel, where its importance and effects reverberate more clearly and causally throughout the story, as it marks a moment of deep betrayal for Jude, which leads him further in his self-hatred, as he uses it as a way to confirm his worst fears: that even his friends see him just as badly as he sees himself. This episode leads him to more easily accept Caleb's behavior mere pages further, creating a clear cause and effect link between JB's betrayal and Jude's lapse into an abusive situation, and highlighting the importance of a support system (or what is perceived as a lack thereof) in overcoming trauma. In the play, however, despite it following the same chain of events, with the mocking preceding Caleb's arc, in lack of the mental commentary from Jude, the scene does not read as markedly as in the novel, and JB's remorse is barely shown at all. The examples listed above are not the only instances of cut narratives. Jude's accomplishments in college and career are not highlighted, and, overall, what would be considered the mundane and daily living of the characters, comprising the happy aspects of the story, are not included.

The point of highlighting these differences is not to assess the fidelity of the play to the novel it adapts, but rather to use Ryan's classification in order to show and better understand what kind of story the play chooses to tell. As she herself states, "rather than limiting its scrutiny to those parts of the text which explicitly represent the story, the study of narrativity assesses the role of the story with respect to the whole of the text, taking both narrative and non-narrative elements into consideration." (Ryan, 1992: 369). The difference, therefore, is that although both of the works deal with trauma and life, the novel also includes what makes it bearable, the happy moments and Jude's accomplishment in spite of all the traumatic experiences. It is a different framing of a story with the same ending.

For some of the avid readers of the novel, however, this departure from the original text was considered significant, and, moreover, was viewed particularly negatively, rather as a flaw of the adaptation, not a mere difference. This leads to the play garnering intense criticism that it is "too much" (Shaw, 2022, s. p.) or "just trauma porn" (Akbar, 2023, s. p.), due to focusing solely on the traumatic aspects of the protagonists' life and cutting out the rest. This was also a particularly interesting phenomenon in the reception of this adaptation, since, as Hutcheon points out "if an adaptation is perceived as 'lowering' a story (according to some imaginary hierarchy of medium or genre), response is likely to be negative" (2006: 3), a statement which was generally proven to be true, but which also works in the reverse. Seeing as theater is usually considered the higher brow art form, the natural expectation would be that the play would be considered a kind of upgrade to the original story, not a lowering of it, as some criticism has suggested.

When making use of the modes of narrativity, Ryan highlights that it is important "to ask whether they allow a full realization of narrativity or imply a deficient manifestation. By full realization I mean two properties: the text must allow the reconstruction of a complete narrative structure and this structure must be suggested by a narratorial speech act" (1992:

384). Van Hove's play does allow for the reconstruction, it does tell a full story on its own, and it includes what would reasonably be considered the key points. But the difference is an interpretative one, one of social commentary about the subject depicted. The novel suggests that there can be happiness and achievement even through all the catastrophic difficulties it presents, while the play essentially ignores this aspect. The ending is the same in both cases: Jude's suicide. However, the framing is different, and the journey to the endpoint is different, which leads the audience to different understandings or empathic reactions. The achievements are also of unique importance in Jude's case, as his character is disabled, and ignoring his capabilities and the whole of his journey makes for a truncated depiction, which implies what could be considered some serious social commentary issues. The novel, on the other hand, highlights the fact that Jude's only self-worth derives from these professional and academic achievements, and both the play and the novel do a good job in showing Jude's own disdain about himself in the numerous times when he calls himself a "cripple", but the play, lacking Jude's internal monologue, does not manage to show as evidently how this self-hatred fuels some of his more destructive tendencies and deters him from engaging romantically with Willem sooner. The viewer is only suggested this notion well over the half mark of the play, when, during an argument, Jude yells out "I'm not going to be the cripple you get to save" (van Hove, 2018: 2:47:18), implying that Jude has always believed that Willem's only reasoning for being with him was some form of charity or savior complex. Yet this interpretation is more understandable earlier in the novel, simply by reading between the lines of Jude's internal convictions.

Both of the examples mentioned above suggest that what the play seems to lack is a cohesive cause and effect depiction. The novel, with its vast dwelling on Jude's internal world, allows the reader an easier reconstruction of the causal links between thoughts, traumas, actions and events. The play, although following the same structures largely, seems to lose some of this ease of reconstruction, because it cannot show the world through Jude's eyes as easily as the omniscient narrator does, and having him narrate these things in his monologues would imply that he has an own understanding of his thoughts, rather than receiving this information by means of the omniscient narrator, which would have portrayed an entirely different psychological battle. Hutcheon mentions that "attempts to use the camera for first-person narration – to let the spectator see only what the protagonist sees – are infrequent" (2006: 54), likely because of scenic constraints and difficulty of portraying this intention. But this is supplemented sometimes through the camera work by means of close ups of the protagonist's face and facial acting. Theater, of course, lacks this possibility, but the streamed version, with its means of editing and camerawork, supplements it. One clear example of this takes place at 2:30:00 hour mark, during Jude and Willem's intimate moments, where a narrator would break the spell of the play, but a wide-angle depiction would fail to accurately portray Jude's distress.

As for the limitations of the stage, of which Hutcheon also warns (2006: 42), van Hove's play makes clever use of technological advancements by using screens to project different scenes in the background. For instance, during the abuse scene where Caleb throws Jude into the street, the screens are showing images of the streets of New York and the sound of cars and horns are overlaid on top of the actors' speech (van Hove, 2018: 1:37:34 – 1:38:03). This is tied in with the camerawork, which uses frantic motions, suggestive of Jude's attempts to dodge the moving vehicles. This is one instance of what Hutcheon terms movement from

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showing to showing (2006: 43), where the camerawork also adds complexity to the scene, which is not there for the audience watching the play in the theater.

In terms of actors' work, there is added symbolism in the play, as Hans Kesting plays all three of the antagonists, suggesting that the face of the abuser is not important, that it all blends together, and the only thing pervading remains the abuse itself. Set design and costumes also work alongside to add to the symbolism, as the set keeps all of Jude's friends in the background almost at all times, suggesting how life goes on for them while Jude is forced to push through whatever traumatic incident is shown at that point. After the abuse Jude endures at the hands of Caleb, he never changes his bloody costume again for the duration of the play, symbolic of how he is never the same in his adult life after he suffers said trauma. At one point, while recounting to Willem the abuse he endured at the hands of dr. Traylor, Jude removes the bloody costume and is left naked for a while, only for Willem to symbolically dress him again in the same shirt, at the 03:13:00 mark, once the trauma flashback concludes. This act can have multiple interpretations: either symbolic of Willem understanding that Jude can never change what has happened to him, or suggesting that Willem's insistence for physical intimacy was also traumatic for Jude, since the shirt first becomes bloody when Caleb sexually assaults him. Either way, it shows that the visual media manages to create its own symbols, confirming Granofsky's aforementioned statement that symbolism is the most potent way that storytellers have in order to accurately and wholly portraying trauma.

To conclude, van Hove's adaptation of Yanagihara's novel is a complex case study of the processes of adaptation, and how each element that goes into creating an adaptation adds layers over layers, presupposing interpretative acts and changes. As Hutcheon says, "recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing adaptation; so too is change" (2006: 4), but, "an adaptation's double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis" (2006: 6). Instead, each medium's specificity must be taken into consideration, in order to make a full assessment and analysis of the derived work. The ample and challenging theme of trauma manages to be tackled in both mediums with success, so long as each medium maximizes its own strengths in order to create a vivid picture of what the traumatized individual experiences in his daily life. The visual media cannot use the same techniques in the same way they were used in the novel, but they can be adapted in order to better suit its own specificity, as long as the person who adapts the text has a core understanding of what the original artificers were meant to achieve.

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