

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Literatures and Cultural Studies Faculty
Publications and Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

2-22-2021

Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation

Linda Belau

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/lcs_fac



Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Belau, Linda. 2021. Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation. *Arts* 10: 15.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10010015>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literatures and Cultural Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

Article

Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation

Linda Belau

Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies, The University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley,
Edinburg, TX 78539, USA; linda.belau@utrgv.edu

Abstract: In this essay, I explore the cinematic adaptation and the representation of trauma, while I further consider the role and significance of the notion of the origin in both trauma and in cinematic adaptation. Through an initial consideration of the relationship between the theory of the impossible origin, particularly as it is articulated by Walter Benjamin, the essay goes on to analyze the significance and role of an impossible origin in the elemental form of adaptation. To this end, the essay considers the movement of adaptation from an autobiographical trauma memoir to a feature film, considering the success or failure of adaptation in situations where the original literary work concerns an experience of extremity. As I consider the vicissitudes of trauma and its grounding in a repetitious structure that leaves the survivor suspended in a kind of missed experience (or missed origin), I further explore how this missing origin (or original text in the case of adaptation) can be represented at all.

Keywords: adaptation; trauma; origin; psychoanalysis; repetition; impossibility; loss; representation; extremity; writing; image; failure; memoir; missed experience



Citation: Belau, Linda. 2021. Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation. *Arts* 10, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10010015>

Received: 14 October 2020
Accepted: 5 February 2021
Published: 22 February 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.

Walter Benjamin

1. Introduction

In this essay, I explore the relation between cinematic adaptation and the representation of trauma, considering the success or failure of adaptation in situations where the original literary work concerns an experience of extremity. Focusing on the impossibility of representation in the writing of trauma, my essay considers how the fundamental impasse that makes writing about trauma fraught with difficulty, particularly in the memoir form, is not readily adaptable to the cinematic form. With attention to the manner in which the impossibility that is fundamental to any attempt at articulation of trauma is managed in the transition from writing to the image, I consider the narrative memoir 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. Through an examination of the work of Solomon Northup, whose slave narrative/trauma memoir was adapted into the Oscar-winning Best Picture film *Twelve Years a Slave*, I consider how this adaptation is able to faithfully articulate the impossible void and failure of representation that characterizes the origin text while, at the same time, presenting a story that rose to commercial success.

In order, then, to proceed toward a counter-narrative that will open on to a different theory of adaptation, I would like to consider another notion of origin and turn to 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, a 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 seems very much the place to begin this essay.

2. The Impossible Origin

In his seminal work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin discusses, among other things, the Baroque German tragic drama artform, *Die Trauerspiel*, in a manner that was quite unexpected for the time. Rather than engaging with more popular and well-known figures, Benjamin focused instead on the outliers of the movement in order to pursue a stunning theory of allegory that would explore the vicissitudes of appropriation between literary and philosophical traditions, ultimately arguing that the allegorical function of melancholia presents a proper form of modernist nostalgia focused, ultimately, on a process of borrowing—that is, of copying and/or handing down—from a tradition in a manner that does not necessarily occur along the straight corridor that many assume. According to Michael Osman, “any arguments for the historical validity of Benjamin’s theories must be based first on his own title, which insists on seeing *Trauerspiel* through its origin (or *Ursprung*) as opposed to its genesis (or *Entstehung*). In contrast to the necessarily forward movement of creation implied by genesis, origin, as he sees it, is a momentary and recognizable suspension between the past and the future.” Quoting Samuel Weber, Osman continues: “This is the discreet, discontinuous, un-genetic aspect of the origin . . . entirely incompatible with any sort of linear or dialectical development” (Osman 2005, p. 22). In his “Epistemo-Critical Prologue”, Benjamin himself writes, “the term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from a process of becoming and disappearance” (Benjamin 1998, p. 45). Thus, the copy and the origin, he argues, do not align in the manner of simple cause and effect, of pure language that is carried over in a smooth, logical transition (or translation) that renders the copy a pure image of a fully formed and ontologically consistent arche.¹

I begin by way of a deferral with this reflection on the messianic work of Benjamin and his positing of an absent or vanishing origin in the process of translation and/or the transmission of textual material from one form to another since it both introduces us to an early theory of trauma that aligns well with more contemporary deconstructionist-inflected theories of trauma that posit the impossible origin of traumatic experience and also since it parallels the concerns, albeit in a more negative manner, of traditional theories of cinematic adaptation. In classical trauma studies, the notion of the impossible origin is, perhaps, the very kernel of the theory since the notion of traumatic experience as resistant to representation and, in fact, inaccessible to the survivor of the event is the starting point—the unstable origin, as it were—which much of the theory circles around. From Sigmund Freud to Cathy Caruth, the notion of an impossible experience that cannot be fully understood or accessed, other than in its repetition in the failure of its inscription, is an elemental insight. And, while it may seem that there is little relation between this theory and theories of adaptation, I would argue that the issue of the origin, of its accessibility and its possibility, is key to both theories. Further, given that a number of textual literary works that focus on the experience of trauma have been adapted into visual media in the form of cinema or television, it seems even more relevant to think through the parameters of these two theories in relation to each other and in a way that interrogates the seminal

¹ Benjamin’s other major work, “The Task of the Translator” (Benjamin 2007), often studied and cited by literary theorists, pursues the notion of translation in relation to what he calls “pure language”. In this essay, Benjamin also pursues an extended meditation on the relation between a text and the impossibility of its translation and, by extension, the necessarily anacletic notion of the negative relation between an original and its copy. While this essay does not engage with the issues of allegory, melancholia, and, ultimately, trauma, in the way that the *Trauerspiel* study could be argued to do so, it is, nonetheless, an interesting and relevant mediation on the nature of borrowing and copying, of translation and adapting, as it were, from one medium to another.

assumptions of conventional adaptation theory, particularly those theories that presuppose a stable and coherent origin that might be copied, either successfully or not.

3. Trauma and the Impossible Origin

In the context of humanities-oriented discourses on the representation of trauma, it is, seemingly, the autobiographical narrative that offers the most reliable access to—or positivization of—traumatic experience. Since it is the autobiographical witness account that attempts to re-tell the trauma, to describe the traumatic event, and to make sense of the injury, it would seem, on the surface, that such a narrative could represent the experience of trauma. Traditional autobiographical narratives, however, do not begin to do justice to the survivor's relation to the event. Many trauma narratives, in fact, speak of a living death that cannot be socially contextualized within ordinary parameters of understanding. Responding to a radical disruption of meaning, the survivor is suspended in an experience that cannot be addressed directly in the realm of representation. Since this exposure itself is experienced as traumatic, it is actually the impossibility of representation that the survivor witnesses. Intending to give an accurate expression of the experience of trauma, the autobiographical witness narrative only displays its own insufficiency toward this intention.

Insofar as every autobiographical account of catastrophe is both an exposure to and recoiling from the traumatic real, an analysis of the survivor's relation to writing will show us something significant about the force of trauma. In the aftermath of trauma, most survivors feel a compelling need to communicate their experience of the event. Despite the impossibility of making an adequate account, indeed, because of this impossibility, the survivor often turns to writing—to personal memoir—as a symbolic attempt to address what psychoanalysis would call the real kernel of the traumatic experience. According to one survivor's account, "silence is the only proper response but then most of us ... feel that not to speak is impossible. To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible" (Caruth 1995, p. 154).

For the traumatized subject, the event is always necessarily registered only negatively via some symptom, which drives the compulsion to write. This symptom, of course, broadly conceptualized, will be nothing other than the act of testimony itself. Testimony is the symptom of trauma; it is where and how the force of trauma is felt. In his/her/their struggle to describe the experience of an impossible destitution, the traumatized subject must do much more than simply write the truth about the experience, for the truth is never enough. Facing the radical negativity of the trauma through the testimonial form, the survivor must suffer the impossibility of ever being able to make an adequate account of the experience, and this suffering itself constitutes a repetition of traumatic experience. The failure of recollection triggers the structural repetition of trauma. Thus, it would seem, the insufficiency of the testimony and, consequently, the symbolic order's inability to make good on the demand for coherence emerges as traumatic in the witness account. The truth of the trauma is never positively manifest only because the inability of the symbolic order to address the impossible experience is all that "exists" of the experience of trauma. And while this inability, more than anything else, can account for the survivor's failed narrative, it also engenders the very need to write, to make sense of the trauma that the narrative was initially intended to address. This is traumatic repetition, and it finds its most dramatic form in the testimonial account.²

As the author of the trauma narrative addresses his/her/their need to re-count the impossible event to the Other, to make the event meaningful in the symbolic register, a demand for coherence is expressed. Such coherence, it is presumed, would close the void in the symbolic—the real dimension of the experience—that the subject of trauma

² Here we see how the symbolic mandate—or desire—to make the impossible traumatic event transmissible in the field of the Other's what actually gives trauma its abyssal structure. In this sense, trauma is not entirely beyond or outside of social experience. It is, rather, a symbolic phenomenon and very much a social experience. In other words, because of (and not in spite of) its being beyond representation, trauma relies most intimately on the function of language and representation.

encounters. Given the nature of trauma and its resistance to representational form, however, one cannot expect a symbolic intervention to positivize the impossibility that constitutes the heart of trauma. One can never write the truth of the experience simply because trauma shatters the very field of knowledge that makes such notions possible. Despite the survivor's best attempts to situate the trauma through his/her/their testimonial writing, an adequate account of the event—the return to the origin of the traumatic experience—remains impossible.

4. Adaptation and the Lost Origin: Encountering the Impossible in the Image

In the context of literature-to-film adaptation, the aporetic economy of a lost or impossible origin 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. As an example, I would like to turn my focus to Steve McQueen's narrative film *12 Years a Slave*, a dramatic film closely based on and adapted from a non-fictional literary-origin source, Solomon Northup's slave narrative memoir of the same name, to further consider the exigencies of the lost origin and adaptation in the experience of trauma.

Like many slave narratives, Northup's written memoir clearly has a didactic purpose, something that is seen most clearly in the many passages where he exclaims how one should not give way to despair, a credo that is clearly carried over into McQueen's film. In making these repeated claims, the historical Northup is careful to make an ongoing statement about the moral value of overcoming difficult experiences, another lesson to be learned from the slave's experience. Despite the didactic nature of Northup's autobiography, however, the survivor subject's narrative is never able to bring home that message convincingly, and something remains unglued in the narrative, undermining the lessons it purports to teach, as it circles restlessly around the traumatic stain which cannot be epistemically captured, at least not in writing. In this sense, then, the immensely significant story that Northup might tell in his narrative about the perils of slavery and the anguish of human suffering that it imposes is necessarily lost. As such, the social and historical value of the narrative as a kind of cautionary tale is lost as well. Given the structural nature of trauma and the void that traumatic narrative will necessarily write, the experience is, in a manner of speaking, lost, the origin unplumbable. Further, as an origin text that cannot itself return to the original experience it endeavors to articulate and overcome, Northup's memoir complicates even more the already complicated relation between a text and its copy in the relation of cinematic adaptation. Paradoxically, however, it is ultimately this alternative and supplementary mode of representation—cinema and the vehicle of adaptation—which can make some inroads to finally, if indirectly, express the trauma of Northup's shattering experience within the symbolic horizon and to make good on his abyssal endeavor to teach something to the world about his experiences in slavery.

McQueen begins his adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* with Northup immersed in the impossible scene of writing that both characterizes and constitutes Northup's memoir, and the director later repeats it when the flashback chronicle catches up with this point in the narrative, as if to suggest that his film circulates around the same kind of unsignifiable original trauma that persists in Northup's narrative. The film, however, elevates this experience of and encounter with trauma from a more or less ontogenetic—or individual—level to the space of a collective and, ultimately, historical, engagement. And it is precisely in the space and context of this elevation that the film adaptation is both able to complete the articulation of the experience of trauma that eludes Northup and also is able to circulate the didactic element—the lesson that might be learned—in a more socially recognizable form, though it does so in its own mode of failure. In this sense, the film functions as an aesthetic

means of evoking the traumatic stain of slavery, a stain (or impossibility) that never stops not writing itself in both Northup's narrative and, to this day, in American history.³

Some critics have argued that McQueen's use of violence within his film borders on the gratuitous and that the film ultimately leads to a sort of aestheticizing of torment. Countering this position, Henry Louis Gates responds that McQueen "showed remarkable restraint" and that the film "just hints at how violent slavery was" (Quoted in [Dockterman 2013](#)). Thus, according to Gates' point, McQueen's depictions of violence and suffering should not be viewed by critics as egregious or superfluous as a form of stylistic exploitation, as a stylistically artistic rendering of the depredations of slavery. Gates, rather, wants us to engage with the violence in the film, not shirk from it by labeling it gratuitous, because it is grounded in very real events, shattering events that were oftentimes commonplace in the institution of slavery. Gates further suggests that it should not be argued that McQueen's film capitalizes artistically on the inhumanity of slavery since this misses the power of the film to impact the viewer in a historically grounded way. Rather, the film's depictions and representation of the harrowing conditions of slavery should be understood in the manner in which they affect the viewer, how they make something distant immediate and thereby bring the viewer into the scenes viewed, making the viewer part of the history depicted.⁴ But since film is an image-based medium, it lends itself quite readily to aesthetic effects in the traditional sense. For better or worse, film has the aesthetic ability to bridge the distance between spectator and artwork in a number of ways that the textual narrative simply cannot. Using his art to exploit this intimacy is ultimately the way that McQueen is able to move beyond an individual instance of trauma—as articulated in Northup's narrative—to an expression of a collective trauma that forces us to overcome the cultural forgetting that oftentimes veils our apprehension of the profoundly savage dimension of slavery.

McQueen is able to conjure the repetitious nature of the trauma at the heart of American history at moments in the film when the viewer realizes they are not an innocent bystander catching a surreptitious glance at some spectacle which is indifferent to them. Traumatic repetition emerges in this cinematic context when the viewer realizes that the depicted events are strategically staged for the audience's gaze. In this manner, through certain aesthetic and filmic techniques, McQueen is able to, in a way that Northup's symbolic narrative cannot, implicate the viewer into the traumatic history by making palpable the traumatic stain of slavery.

While the film is quite tenacious in its representation of the horrors of slavery, the viewer will, at times, encounter the limited reprieves McQueen's camera provides the spectator as it offers tangential views of the beautiful Louisiana setting. Occasionally, within the film, the spectator is greeted with seemingly idyllic and isolated images of Spanish moss swaying from the trees, as it does in much of the Southeastern United States. However, since one of the first times this tranquil, repeated imagery appears is immediately after Solomon's aborted runaway attempt when he unexpectedly encounters a posse lynching two other runaway slaves, the beautiful image takes on a disturbing dimension. Because the cinematic framing shows the lynching taking place behind Solomon's back (he only hears the event), the immediate image of the seemingly placid swaying Spanish moss becomes associated with so much strange fruit cultivated by the peculiar institution. In another scene, Solomon and a number of his fellow slaves have been loaned out by Master Epps (Michael Fassbender) to another plantation owner (Bryan Batt) because Epps's cotton fields have been overcome by an insect infestation. This infestation furthers the narrative and shows how it is that Solomon was able to earn some of his own money, used later in his failed bribery of a white indentured servant. But the close-up image of the caterpillar calls attention to itself as saying something beyond the narrative at large, something

³ This notion of an impossibility that never stops not writing itself is glossed from Jacques Lacan's mediation on the symptom in Seminar 20, where he writes that the symptom in the Real, as that impossible kernel that resists representation, "never ceases to write itself" ([Lacan 1999](#), p. 144).

⁴ The point is not so much that the film is better, it is rather that the film is able to relay certain emotive experiences and realities differently and, in the case of a traumatic experience, this might allow a spectator to better position themselves vis-a-vis this difficult encounter.

that the narrative may not be able to directly or sufficiently articulate. Not only does McQueen's close-up shot of the infested caterpillar symbolize the confined nature and hope of inevitable freedom/flight of Solomon and the other slaves, but it also references the curse of the Pharaohs that "is a poor example compared to what awaits the Plantation class" mentioned by Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard). This image, thus distorted, takes on meaning beyond itself, then, in at least two different ways, that distorts the impact of its initial emergence.

Since the institution of slavery stained the historical reality of those who were its victims, that reality is subtly portrayed by the film as something other, as bearing an anamorphic trace that distorts its realism. Thus, the film demonstrates how the institution of slavery distorts the space of reality, distorted and damaged it for all those involved. McQueen even shows the devastating effects slavery had on the white Plantation class, especially in the depicted relation between Epps and his wife.⁵ Even when Ridley's screenplay and McQueen's film deviate from the details of Northup's narrative account—the knifing of the captured freedman on the slave ship instead of a small pox death, the attempted rape of Eliza, the actual rape of Patsy—the film introduces historical atrocities of slavery that, while Northup himself may never have experienced them, many slaves did, thus making Northup's narrative a synecdoche, a stand-in, for slavery itself. The film adaptation is obviously a condensation of one slave narrative, necessary for fitting the narrative into the length of a feature film, but it also functions as a condensation of the history of slavery, never quite comfortable documenting just one exceptional slave story.

5. Distorting the Space of Representation: Adaptation Beyond the Limits of the Original

There are three particular aspects of McQueen's style, which are in one way or another constantly present throughout the film, that carry ramifications beyond the narrative itself and distort the space of representation: the poetic use of the close-up and extreme close-up shot, the ubiquitous use of shallow focus, and the intermittent use of the long take, especially reserved for the most harrowing scenes. After the initial opening, the film transitions to the past to fill in the story of Solomon Northup. This "flashback" is at first a bit disorienting, as McQueen uses an extreme close-up shot of what the viewer soon learns is Northup stringing a violin. Later, after Northup's kidnapping and incarceration, McQueen utilizes an extreme close-up shot of Northup between the fragmentary memory flashbacks that only partially reveal what has happened to him. Appearing immediately after Northup recalls being put to bed by Brown and Hamilton, McQueen's extreme close-up shot of our protagonist brings the viewer into proximity with Northup's own bewilderment, as if he himself is too close to the unfolding events to make sense of his situation. These early extreme close-ups prefigure the use of others used throughout the film. On one level, these shots are indicative of McQueen's style, of his penchant for composition over story. But, on another level, the use of extreme close-up in these shots and throughout the film indicates, at least figuratively, the director's intention to bring the spectator closer to the content, closer to the traumatic experience of the institution of slavery than narrative will allow, even when the narrative is a first-person testimonial account.⁶ With this stylistic technique, McQueen suggests that beneath the symbolic narrative, beneath Northup's attempt to provide a rational narrative to his otherwise shattering experience of abduction and enforced bondage, there is a content to his experience that has been obscured by

⁵ Gates has commented that "one of the most amazing and successful things the film does is show the way that slavery dehumanizes the master as well as the slave" (Quoted in [Dockterman 2013](#)).

⁶ My point here is not so much to claim that screening a film about traumatic content is necessarily a "better" approach to witnessing trauma. I am, rather, working to point out how the figure of trauma, as an impossible experience that can only be approached in the failure of its inscription or in its withdrawal from the context of "understanding" is more readily evoked in McQueen's filmic text by virtue of its ability to evoke strong emotion that may not be readily understood or easily processed by the viewer. This does not indicate a superior mode of expressing trauma, or even suggest that witnessing trauma second-hand is a better way to understand the experience. Rather, I am suggesting that film and memoir function in radically different ways and that different elements or layers of a trauma might be evoked in varying ways in each media.

the desire to make sense of the experience, by the desire to render his experience clear and meaningful.

This use of close-ups by McQueen implies an emphasis with scale as much as with proximity, with the magnitude of the stain of slavery as much as with the haunting nearness of this traumatic aspect of American history. These extreme close-up shots demarcate moments in the film when the scene itself marks a surpassing of the limits of the narrative, an opening onto something that cannot be directly signified. It is McQueen's means of informing the film's spectators that they are entering an uncanny realm, a realm where everything is turned upside down, where the return of the traumatic past that would rather be forgotten is inescapable. In this sense, McQueen's film is able to convey the trauma of both Northup's experience and the slave's experience in general, not just at the level of representation but also through distortions in the visual field. These distortions not only indirectly reveal the inability to provide a full and clear account, they mark a certain fidelity to not just the content of Northup's memoir but to the memoir's own inability to account positively for its own lost origin.

This idea of getting the spectator closer to the content of Northup's experience, of providing the spectator with a glimpse of what lies beyond the limits of Northup's narrative, is also figured in McQueen's stylistic decision to shoot virtually the entire film in shallow focus. By relying primarily on shallow focus, which at appropriate times morphs into selective focusing, McQueen again highlights the particular over the background, bringing the viewer closer to the real as these shots often lift the content and character out of the context into an immediacy that often appears unmediated. Early after Northup's abduction, for example, when he confronts his kidnappers with the truth about his freeman status, McQueen shoots him in the foreground, out of focus. McQueen saves the focused middle ground of the *mis en scène* for Northup's captor. By doing so, McQueen emphasizes the lack of belief in Northup's story by the abductors. Northup is out of focus as if to indicate the lack of subjectivity that comes with being a "Georgia runaway", as his abductor repeatedly calls him. Later, when Master Ford attempts to negotiate the sale of Eliza's daughter with Freeman at the auction house in New Orleans, McQueen keeps the focus tight on Ford and Freeman, keeping the pleading Eliza blurred in the background. In this scene, McQueen strategically keeps Eliza out of focus, testifying to Freeman's inhumane decision to keep Eliza's concerns out of his focus. More significantly, McQueen's decision to use shallow focus throughout the film brings the spectator into an intimacy with Northup and his fellow slaves in a manner that simply cannot be conveyed in a textual medium. Shallow focus creates a blurred background throughout not only to draw the spectator to the immediacy of the experience of the characters but also to literally blur the background story, to get to the immediate trauma as a constant pressure. Again, this is McQueen's method of highlighting negatively that the origin is being lost in the process.

Lastly, McQueen resorts to long takes in the film, especially for the harrowing, gruesome, and traumatic depictions of the brutality that was part of the slave's experience. The first long take occurs shortly after Northup's abduction. In the scene where Northup wakes to find himself chained and locked up after being drugged by Hamilton and Brown, he is shown being beaten by one of the slave bootleggers. In this scene, McQueen combines the long take with shallow focus, keeping the focus squared on Northup in the foreground, allowing the spectator an intimacy with the hero's anguish. Through this technique, McQueen isolates the viewer with Northup, bringing the spectator into the picture in a manner that would not be the same if McQueen had relied on a deep-focus shot or if he had edited the scene back and forth with rapid cutting between the batterer and Northup. Throughout the film, McQueen utilizes the long take for these traumatic scenes as a relentless means of transfixing the viewer's attention to the scene's immediacy, a capturing that could not work with the reprieve that editing offers. This strategic use of the long take is repeated later in the scene depicting the aborted lynching of Northup by Tibbeats. In a nearly two-minute take, Northup is shown dangling from a rope with the tips of his toes barely touching the ground while the film pictures the everyday routine of the plantation roll by in the

background. McQueen could have cut this scene numerous times, showing the sky turn darker as the day passes, indicating the length that Northup had to endure his punishment. But, by providing a single long take, by forcing the audience to watch this unbearable scene without the reprieve and artificiality associated with editing, the film blurs the line between representation and reality and, thereby, allows something traumatic to emerge on a plane outside of or along the side of representation. The longest take of the film occurs near the end during Patsey's whipping. In an almost five-minute take, McQueen dramatizes the most brutal and painful scene of the film. Unlike the other long takes in the film, McQueen here uses a moving camera to capture the intricacy of the action without having to rely on edits. The lack of editing in this brutal scene makes it unbearable and relentless. A five-minute shot in a film seems three times as long to an audience used to the rapid cutting of much commercial cinema, and, in this case, the extended scene forces its own measure of anguish onto the viewer. This imposed self-awareness onto the spectator showcases how the film has already incorporated the audience into the story and, by connection, to the larger history.

6. Screening Impossibility: Adaptation as Working Through

It is this connection to a larger history, a history that is grounded in a particular instance of traumatic experience, that sets McQueen's film adaptation apart. The film certainly does not cave into the general American audience's demand for pleasing entertainment, and it equally resists the temptation to romanticize Northup's overcoming of his ordeal. Additionally, the film does not simply show the viewer what most other films about slavery fail or refuse to show. More significantly, the film evokes cinematically what cannot be shown: how the peculiar institution of slavery imposes a traumatic experience that cannot necessarily be readily articulated. McQueen's adaptation is not content to leave the traumatic experience and history of slavery to the failure of a specific articulation, however. Instead, *12 Years a Slave* inaugurates a sort of collective working through as it engages aesthetically and compositionally with the impasse in understanding that characterizes the representational impossibility at the heart of Northup's narrative. In re-presenting his story, the film both draws in and elevates the spectator's engagement with Northup's particular trauma and ultimately conveys the collective dimension of our nation's shattered past, a past that has left its traumatic stain on American history, a stain that shall remain until the trauma is properly worked through. Because of McQueen's compositional techniques—extreme close-up photography, ubiquitous shallow focus, agonizing long takes—his film reveals the essential strength of cinematic adaptation: its ability to suggest things that are not expressible in words. In doing so, *12 Years a Slave* remains faithful to what could not be accounted for in Northup's memoir by intimating precisely what has not been adequately represented within the saga of American history.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 2007. The Task of the Translator. In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Harry Zohn. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 69–82.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1998. *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. 1995. *Trauma Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 154.
- Dockterman, Elaine. 2013. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Talks *12 Years a Slave* and the *African Americans*. Available online: <http://entertainment.time/2013/10/22/henry-louis-gates-jr.com> (accessed on 22 February 2021).
- Lacan, Jacques. 1999. *Seminar XX, Encore*. New York: Norton.
- Osman, Michael. 2005. Benjamin's Baroque. *Thresholds* 28: 119–29. [CrossRef]