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**Preserving the Trauma Narrative of The Hunger Games: as based  
in the novels, the films, and morality**

Rio Turnbull

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Honors Thesis

PRESERVING THE TRAUMA NARRATIVE OF *THE HUNGER GAMES*:  
AS BASED IN THE NOVELS, THE FILMS, AND MORALITY

by  
Rio Turnbull

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment  
of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department  
Brigham Young University  
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## ABSTRACT

### PRESERVING THE TRAUMA NARRATIVE OF *THE HUNGER GAMES*: AS BASED IN THE NOVELS, THE FILMS, AND MORALITY

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English Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis discusses both the technical aspects and the moral aspects of preserving trauma when adapting a trauma novel to film, in specific relation to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. The thesis begins by arguing the *Hunger Games* story as a trauma narrative in its original form, but not so in its film adaptations, and supports this argument by defining the defining characteristics of the trauma narrative—which is voicelessness and an altered sense of self and society, embedded in the internal experience—and applying it to *The Hunger Games* trilogy, identifying where these occur in the novels and do not in the films. It then addresses the question of if films are capable of portraying trauma narratives at all by assessing Laurie Halse Anderson's trauma novel and film *Speak*. Doing so reveals film techniques successfully employed to convey the trauma narrative. The conclusion then draws upon the questions of filmmaker obligation, the impact of the removal of a trauma narrative on a story, what purpose can be found in representing the trauma narrative in its entirety, and what can be gained by those who engage with it.



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To Mom and Dad: thank you for being the best parents anyone could ask for, and for everything else that follows, but most especially thank you for teaching me the importance of stretching myself and of taking every opportunity to grow. This is the accomplishment I'm most proud of, and I likely wouldn't have even begun it without you.



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## Introduction

In 2012, I was among the many eager fans attending the premiere of the first *Hunger Games* film. I cherished these novels more than any other popular YA series I had read at the time. This had to do not with its status of being the newest hit dystopian sensation wherein teenagers rebel against a despotic government, nor was I wrapped up in the “love triangle” like most of the media had enjoyed fixating on. Rather, I had identified this story to be one of trauma. This observation was bolstered by having learned early on that Suzanne Collins, the author, had based the trauma experiences of the protagonist and other characters upon her family’s own traumatic experiences. The *Independence* article “Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy speaks to a generation of teenage readers like no other literary creation - but what’s the big message?” also observes this influence:

[*The Hunger Games*’s] origins can be found in a war fought a generation earlier. Collins’ father, an officer in the US air force, was sent to serve in Vietnam in 1968, around the time she turned six. ... Collins Snr returned safe, though he suffered nightmares. In the early 1970s, the air force posted him and his family to Brussels, where he would take his four children on regular and comprehensive tours of the local battlefields. Collins learned that her grandfather had been gassed during the First World War, her uncle wounded by shrapnel in the Second. ... Katniss Everdeen’s signature skill is archery, which she has learned as a child to hunt for food for her family’s table. That, too, is an echo from Collins’ father, who grew up during the Depression, hunting and foraging for food that his family could not otherwise afford. ... Her father had ... a gift for storytelling, his

daughter thought, and a “sense of exactly how much a child could handle, which is quite a bit.” ... Collins’ work could, therefore, be seen as an attempt to continue her father’s project, of teaching young people about the horrors of war. (Walker)

This idea that Collins, in her writing, is building on the stories her father told her of trauma—because, really, what are the horrors of war if they are not trauma?—adds a certain kind of depth to these stories that I took a shining to. Collins intentionally draws upon history and trauma that is real and personal. Instead of the trauma of *The Hunger Games* being a natural by-product of the larger events of the story, it is thoughtfully brought in, impacting every character involved to the point where their identities, beliefs, and actions stem from what they had suffered. The journey of the main character, Katniss Everdeen, is specifically defined by her trauma. She is closed off both verbally and emotionally, very rarely revealing herself in a constant effort of maintaining survival, which she has learned as a result of the trauma she has experienced. It was apparent to me that Katniss’s narrative was rooted in her experiences with trauma and that her trauma narrative was at the true heart of the novel.

Yet when I walked out of the film the night of the premiere, I was coming to new realizations about the story. What was most absent from the film was the first-person perspective that the novels maintain, and I realized that having that access to Katniss’s internal experience was essential to understanding her. Because she is so closed off, it can be difficult to both relate to and understand Katniss’s motivations. In the novels, this is navigated by using Katniss’s internal voice as the driving force behind the narration, allowing readers a chance to understand how her trauma constantly impacts her. The film establishes no such access, which meant that the viewer is deprived of knowledge

essential to truly understanding Katniss. I was beginning to understand that comprehending the trauma and how it shapes Katniss was essential to understanding Katniss's story. Without it, the films' version of Katniss would be incomplete.

As time passed and I saw the remainder of the trilogy's film adaptations (*Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay - Part 1* and *Part 2*) as they were released, I came to the conclusion that not only had Katniss's internal experience been almost completely excluded, the trauma event that initiates Katniss's trauma narrative had not been apparent enough, and its vagueness causes the trauma narrative element of *The Hunger Games* stories to be lost altogether. But within that passage of time, I also ended up observing that films as a medium are inherently third-person. I often found that there was no way for filmmakers to bring to life access to the internal experience of a character in the same way that a novel can—and yet, understanding Katniss's mind and how the events and trauma of her life shaped the way she thought was, to me, paramount to understanding her. This led me to wonder if it was even possible for the filmmakers of *The Hunger Games* to capture the first-person perspective enough to preserve the trauma narrative of these stories, or if it were an impossible task. Can the impact of trauma on a character still be communicated to viewers despite a film being unable to access a character's thoughts as a first-person novel can?

In this thesis, I will explore this question by first establishing the definition of a trauma narrative, including specifying characteristics that would take away from the entirety of the trauma narrative if they were not present. Then, I will talk about two trauma narratives: *The Hunger Games* trilogy and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. I will first analyze *The Hunger Games* in order to support my claim that *The Hunger Games*

story is a trauma narrative. I will do this by highlighting essential moments in the text that are congruent with the defining characteristics of trauma narratives. After doing so, I will turn to its film adaptations and identify what it excludes or reinterprets, making connections between the scene counterparts of the essential trauma narrative moments in the book, and describe how those choices prevent the films from preserving the trauma narrative and changes how viewers understand Katniss.

I will then repeat this process with *Speak*. I have chosen to analyze *Speak* in addition to the *Hunger Games* novels because it can provide a point of comparison. Understanding how *Speak*'s film adaptation succeeds in preserving the trauma narrative in ways that *The Hunger Games* films did not will help me answer the question of whether or not it would have been possible for *The Hunger Games* films to be trauma films. *Speak* also holds several narrative similarities to *The Hunger Games*: both of the main characters are young adult women who have undergone trauma that, among other things, causes them to become withdrawn and reserved—but because their stories are first-person narratives, the reader can personally understand the character's struggle with their trauma as both reader and protagonist go through the struggle together. Establishing this understanding of the ways in which the film of *Speak* was able to preserve the trauma narrative will then allow me to take my examination of *The Hunger Games* films further.

By the end, I will take a close look at the moral questions that could arise in relation to this topic. In adapting a trauma narrative from book to film, do filmmakers have a moral obligation to preserve the trauma rather than interpreting the story as they feel? What does the *Hunger Games* story become if the trauma narrative is stripped

away? What is really the purpose of representing the full narrative of a trauma survivor, and what does that mean to us?

### **Review of Trauma Theory in Novels**

Trauma theorist, Laurie Vickroy, opens her book, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, with a clear definition of trauma: “a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption” (ix). Trauma narratives, therefore, are narratives that explore a character’s emotional, cognitive, and psychological responses to trauma over the course of an established period of time. More than that, however, they are “fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experience” (1). Rather than putting forth trauma as something to be merely examined like “subject matter or character study,” the intention of trauma narratives is to process the trauma in such a way that both communicates the character’s experience and highlights the obstacles that stand in the way of communicating that experience (2). Said obstacles include “silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression, among others” (3). These align well with additional trauma theorist Michelle Balaev’s own examinations:

A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. ... Trauma, in my analysis, refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. ... The trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic event

disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environment. (149-150)

While there are many defining characteristics of trauma narratives, Vickroy and Balaev's observations can be separated into two distinct categories: voicelessness, which involves the silence and speechless fright, and the alteration of one's sense of self and society, which involves perceptual changes in identity and societal structure. Both of these characteristics are often brought about by the other obstacles that Vickroy names, which can be categorized as coping mechanisms. I will delve into specific examples of these defining characteristics of trauma narratives later when I talk about *The Hunger Games* and *Speak* being trauma narratives.

However, these two primary characteristics (voicelessness, and an altered sense of both self and society) are ultimately found within something larger, and that is the internal experience. I frequently refer to this idea throughout this paper, and what I mean when using this phrase is an experience that a character undergoes within themselves. In other words, while another character may be able to observe the outward expressions of the character's response to trauma, the main responses will be taking place mentally and emotionally, and are best understood when the audience (reader or viewer) is able to access the character's thoughts and emotions as both reactions to and processing of the trauma they have experienced. An example is a hallucination, or a nightmare: an outsider can observe the potential hyperventilation, crying, screaming, writhing, and other physical reactions to what is happening inside the sufferer's mind, but cannot actually see for themselves what the person is experiencing nor understand what the person is

processing and why they are reacting to the experience in such a way unless they are able to obtain access to the sufferer's internal experience via either being inside their head (which is, of course, mostly impossible in real life, but less so in both literature and film) or being told about the sufferer's internal experience by the sufferer themselves.

Several trauma theorists, including Vickroy and Balaev, emphasize the strongly held belief that a victim's internal reaction, processing, and response to trauma ends up defining the trauma, which, as a result, means that understanding a victim's internal experience to trauma is essential to understanding the trauma. Balaev points to renowned literary critic Cathy Caruth, saying that the literary trauma theory as defined by critics such as her "considers the responses to traumatic experience, including cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness, as an inherent characteristic of traumatic experience," both of which are responses that happen internally (150). Caruth argued in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). To extend that explanation, trauma is not locatable in the traumatizing event, but rather in the survivor's experience of emotionally, cognitively, and psychologically (in other words, internally) reacting, processing, and responding to the event.

### **The Trauma Narrative of *The Hunger Games* in Novels and Films**

Now these characteristics of trauma narratives must be applied to these stories. Readers can easily understand and have access to the internal experiences of Katniss



Everdeen due to *The Hunger Games* novels being in the first-person. While I will avoid entering into any discourse on what point-of-view a trauma novel arguably must or mustn't use, I find the first-person point-of-view to be especially useful in accessing and understanding the internal experience because it grants readers unfiltered access to the thoughts inside a character's head. If our protagonist is experiencing a hallucination or a nightmare, we are not limited to the knowledge an outside character would have. Instead, we can be the character ourselves, and have immediate access to their internal experience. A third-person novel could allow readers to access what is happening internally in the protagonist's mind and many other characters' by creating an omniscient narrator, and thereby craft a trauma experience for the reader that is defined by multiple viewpoints. But if the intention of a trauma narrative is to avoid examining a trauma experience from a detached viewpoint and instead to engage with the trauma alongside the sufferer's struggles, a first-person perspective may be a more beneficial option, as it allows us to go through the trauma experience as the character would: limited to their own head and how they process the world around them. It is this specific internal experience that helps to guide our understanding of our protagonist's journey.

Though the film adaptations of *The Hunger Games* do not contain the clear indicators of a trauma narrative (the internal experience, plus voicelessness and altered sense of self and society<sup>1</sup>), the novels do. Katniss's trauma narrative begins before the events of the first book. Readers join Katniss once she has already suffered through the trauma event that primarily defines her. Her voicelessness and altered sense of society are

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<sup>1</sup> For fair warning, these characteristics often intertwine and can be caused by the other, as the trauma experience is one of inner chaos, so as I describe Katniss's (and later, Melinda's) trauma narrative, I will do my best to indicate when these aspects appear, even if they may not be individually apparent to or separate from one another.

triggered by the death of her father, which is the very first trauma she experiences. In the final book, her voicelessness is amplified, creating an extended kind of trauma experience where one trauma experience informs and shapes the following. The only thing that never seems to make an appearance is her altered sense of self. There is, however, the presence of other obstacles of trauma as mentioned by Vickroy, such as silence, dissociation, and repression that take place, so while an altered sense of self is frequently a main aspect of a trauma narrative, its absence doesn't make her trauma experience less of one. While Katniss has several kinds of traumatic responses to various events throughout the trilogy, I will focus on the events that are in accordance with the definition of the trauma narrative.

Preceding the first novel, *The Hunger Games*, is her father's death. It has an intense impact on her, and she refers to him frequently throughout the trilogy. Some moments are specifically trauma-related, but other times it is a simple reflection of her loss: "My father. He seems to be everywhere today. ... I miss him so badly it hurts" (*Mockingjay* 211). Katniss's voicelessness as caused by her father's loss is tied closely with how her sense of society and the world around her is altered. Losing her father meant losing both of her parents, as her mother became depressed and neglectful of her two small children:

[My mother] didn't do anything but sit propped up in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets on her bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. ... No amount of pleading from Prim seemed to affect her. I was terrified. ... [A]t the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well. At

eleven years older, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. There was no choice. (27)

Katniss reacted to her mother's all-but-physical absence in two ways: she emotionally withdrew in an effort to protect herself from being dependent on others, and finds it difficult to express her feelings; and, having been forced to be the sole caretaker and provider for her family lest they starve to death, she learns to prioritize survival above all else, which causes her to refrain from speaking her mind politically when it doesn't help her or her loved ones' situations. We see this in her thoughts towards her friend Gale, as he fumes over an unjust situation caused by their tyrannical government:

As we walk, I glance over at Gale's face, still smoldering underneath his stony expression. His rages seem pointless to me, although I never say so. It's not that I don't agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill out stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game. (14)

This intense dedication to keeping herself and those under her care safe and alive informs many of Katniss's actions throughout the stories. It causes her to take her sister's place when being selected as a participant in the Hunger Games, it influences her to be compassionate to another Games contestant who reminds her of Prim, it makes her find a way to cheat the Games and bring both Peeta (the other participant from her home, and someone she reluctantly cares about) and herself home (thereby sparking country-wide rebellions and the final war), and it compounds her reactions to trauma in the final book, *Mockingjay*. At the end of the rebellion, Katniss's sister Prim is killed in a bombing. Ever since her father's death, the primary focus of Katniss's protective efforts was her sister.

In the event of losing her, and thus failing to keep her alive in accordance to her main purpose in life, Katniss's voicelessness takes over completely. In her grief, she becomes mute.

The doctors' puzzlement grows over why I'm unable to speak. Many tests are done, and while there's damage to my vocal cords, it doesn't account for it.

Finally, Dr. Aurelius, a head doctor, comes up with the theory that ... my silence has been brought on by emotional trauma. (351)

Her voicelessness recovers when her sense of society alters for a final time.

Katniss comes to the realization that her sister was not killed by an act of the Capitol, her enemy, but instead by a trap created by the rebellion, the entity with whom she was fighting. Her perception of who is the real evil changes, and instead of killing the head of the Capitol (President Snow), she kills the head of the rebellion and future head of their country (President Coin). Having in a roundabout way made up for her failure to protect her sister, Katniss slowly recovers. In the final chapters of the novel, she becomes more capable of confronting her trauma rather than repressing it, and allows herself to emotionally open up and connect with those around her, in a way her verbal reticence didn't permit. She builds a life of healing from trauma, rather than being burdened by it.

Slowly, with many lost days, I come back to life. I try to follow Dr. Aurelius's advice, just going through the motions, amazed when one finally has meaning again. ... We seal the pages [of our memory album] with salt water and promises to live well to make [the deaths of those we loved] count. (387)

Without a deep understanding of how her father's death impacted Katniss, consumers of Katniss's story would not be able to understand her primary trauma

narrative. Yet, this is precisely what the *Hunger Games* films are missing. There is a singular sequence in the first film, wherein Katniss is both dreaming and hallucinating after being poisoned by tracker jackers (mutated wasps, whose venom induces hallucinations) in the Hunger Games. It is after the moment Katniss passes out (indicated by a sudden swooping, downward arch of the camera—not unlike the Dutch angle—while we see the trees above Katniss circle abruptly and then cut to darkness) that the filmmaker takes the opportunity to delve into Katniss’s past. In the book, Katniss only glosses over the nightmares she has following her blackout:

I enter a nightmare from which I wake repeatedly ... Each time I wake, I think, *At last, this is over*, but it isn’t. It’s only the beginning of a new chapter of torture.

How many ways do I watch Prim die? Relive my father’s last moments? Feel my own body ripped apart? This is the nature of the tracker jacker venom, so carefully created to target the place where fear lives in your brain (195).

Katniss passes over the details of her “father’s last moments” and that significance to her in the novel because the readers already have an established understanding of what that means to her. However, because the filmmakers do not take the time to establish this earlier on, the only understanding viewers have of her father’s death is what is conveyed to us as she is unconscious. The filmmaker cuts to memories of her father by showing us a look at her house, as if we are wandering inside it ourselves. The camera focuses in on a photo of her father, indicating to us what Katniss’s mind is on. We then see a group of men enter the elevator that pulls them into the depths of the mine, followed by a blast emerging from that same entrance that then blows apart Katniss’s home, leaving it in ruins despite the fact that, having seen Katniss at her house

at the beginning of the film, we know her house is completely intact. We can therefore assume that this image is representative of the way the center of her life and family fell apart upon her father's death. We then see Katniss is attempting to verbally connect with her unresponsive mother, despite not being able to hear Katniss's voice until she grows more desperate in trying to prompt a reaction from her mother. It is only when her mother opens her mouth and Peeta's voice comes out—accompanied with the response of Katniss's confusion on her face—that we are forcefully brought back to reality. Katniss wakes and is in the middle of the forest, covered with tracker jacker stings.

All of this attempts to hint at the person Katniss is, to hint at the trauma that turned her into who she is today, but it falls short. We have no way of processing this reliving of her father's death in accordance with Katniss's personal understanding because Katniss has no reaction to his death outside of her dream. Instead, when wakes, she seems completely unaffected, proceeding to focus on surviving the Hunger Games.

While the depiction of Katniss's nightmare is an attempt to allude to the trauma that defines Katniss's character, we see no impact of that on her in either the moments following the nightmare or in any other aspect of her life. Because we are unable to see what the relationship between Katniss and her father consisted of, we have nothing against which to contrast the Katniss we know. While her voicelessness is preserved as she speaks approximately the same amount as she does in the film, we don't have the traumatic event to inform us that these characteristics are borne from a traumatic experience. As a result, any narrative techniques that are employed are less in service of maintaining a trauma narrative, and more to preserve the first-person nature of the original story. Even then, that isn't fully maintained. The narrative technique used is

primarily the invisible observer, with varying levels of focalization (though primarily limited to zero and external focalization). The film takes on new perspectives as the viewers are privy to information no one person would know. We see Katniss's experience, but we also see private conversations between President Snow and the creators of the Hunger Games, and the behind-the-scenes controls of the game while it is in action (and while our protagonist is in the midst of it). Not only is this film no longer one rooted in a trauma narrative, we are no longer limited solely to Katniss's experiences—and understandably so, as the removal of the trauma focus removes the need to experience everything through Katniss's eyes as part of her trauma experience.

In the film *Mockingjay — Part 2*, wherein Prim dies, Katniss never becomes mute as a result. In this case, the trauma event is present, and though viewers may not have as clear of an understanding of how much Prim's death would impact her due to not understanding how her father's death impacted her, theoretically they could still understand the devastation of losing a precious younger sibling and therefore her muteness in response to it. But without her muteness, and without any access to her internal perspective, the trauma experience becomes incomplete and is never communicated to the viewers.

There are other trauma events that occur in the film, but they still are never fully realized. As a contestant in the Hunger Games, she is forced to kill other young adults in order to survive. But her traumatic response to that is only displayed once. In *Catching Fire*, she attempts to shoot a deer and instead sees, in her mind's eye, her arrow landing in the boy she killed. Hyperventilation ensues as she looks around frantically. We might guess that she thinks she is still in the Games. This is a start, but as it isn't expanded

beyond that, the full extent of Katniss's trauma in relation to the Hunger Games never comes to fruition. In the first film, extreme poverty and starvation is depicted as Katniss walks through her district, we see close up shots of others living around her who are dirty, who have sunken eyes, and who eat food desperately. This is never clearly established to be an experience Katniss shares, however, as she cleans up quite well considering her circumstances, and—while no shame at all intended towards Jennifer Lawrence's figure—by no means communicates the look of someone who constantly fears starvation. Ultimately, the absence of clear and direct access to her thoughts means that any the trauma reaction Katniss might have in response to any event she goes through, from torture to serving as a soldier to causing the destruction of her hometown, goes unexplored and never fully understood. As a result, without capturing the internal experience and thereby allowing for established understanding of the character's responses to trauma, these adaptations cannot preserve the trauma narrative.

### **The Trauma Narrative of *Speak* in Novel and Film**

The question still left to answer is if films can capture the internal experience at all, which leads me to *Speak*. Like *The Hunger Games*, *Speak* is also written in the first-person, which grants the readers unfiltered access to Melinda's internal experience that is akin to the access that *The Hunger Games* provides its readers to Katniss's internal experience. However, a key difference between Katniss's and Melinda's trauma narratives is that, while Katniss's trauma event has fully defined Katniss's character as the novel begins, readers join Melinda as she has just recently been traumatized and is currently coping with how it is impacting her. Melinda is in the early stages of reacting,



processing, and responding to her trauma, and has the opportunity to heal rather than be shaped by her trauma event, as opposed to Katniss, who has been defined by hers.

As the access to Melinda's internal experience is established by the first-person perspective, what remains to establish as elements of this novel (in order for this novel to be defined as a trauma novel) are the aspects of voicelessness and the alteration of one's perception of self and society.

To first set the stage, the trauma that high-school student Melinda suffers is a rape that took place at a party in the summer before her first year of high school (and thus before the events of *Speak*). After being assaulted, Melinda, frightened, called the cops to the party. Unfortunately, due to there being alcohol present at a party filled with underage teenagers, many of her peers were punished by Melinda's action. She, in the midst of the panicking partygoers, fled the party and never told anyone why she contacted the police. The novel follows her through her 9th grade year as she struggles with being ostracized by her friends and peers. This is caused by her isolation, which is both imposed by others and by herself, the latter of which seems to be in an effort of self-protection. Her isolation is furthered by her lack of ability to openly communicate, which is caused by the burden of her trauma (which is, of course, the indication of voicelessness). Her altered sense of society is demonstrated early in the novel, when on her first day of school, she thinks "It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (9). Through her various interactions with teachers and students alike, we readers find through the first-person perspective that Melinda has a lot on her mind that she does not say.

Melinda's voicelessness fluctuates between being voluntary and involuntary. When it is voluntary, it is primarily caused by her altered sense of self and society. She has formed the belief that no one will want to hear what she has to say, and often refrains from talking even when prompted. However, when it is involuntary, it is usually because she has been reminded of the rape and events associated with it. This can take the form of encountering "IT" (her name for the rapist, Andy Evans) in the halls of her school, or encountering her former best friends, who shut her out after she called the cops on the party. When IT is near, her voicelessness is set off as part of, as I see it, survival instinct kicking in—to hide as much as possible in order to not be further harmed. When her ex-friends are near, however, her voicelessness rises despite her desire to tell them everything that happened. The fear of rejection and further vitriol is enough to cause psychosomatic reactions that prevent Melinda from vocalizing a sound.

Another form in which Melinda is reminded of her rape are unexpected circumstances involving anyone at her school. In one instance at a school assembly, she is directly confronted for the first time about her actions at the party.

The girl behind me taps me on the shoulder with her long black nails. She had heard Heather introduce me. "Sordino?" she asks. "You're Melinda Sordino?" I turn around. ... I nod. ... The girl pokes me harder. "Aren't you the one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers's party at the end of the summer?"

A block of ice freezes our section of the bleachers. Heads snap in my direction with the sound of a hundred paparazzi cameras. I can't feel my fingers. I shake my head. Another girl chimes in. "My brother got arrested at that party. He got fired because of the arrest. I can't believe you did that. Asshole."

You don't understand, my headvoice answers. Too bad she can't hear it. My throat squeezes shut, as if two hands of black fingernails are clamped on my windpipe. I have worked so hard to forget every second of that stupid party, and here I am in the middle of a hostile crowd that hates me for what I had to do. I can't tell them what really happened. I can't even look at that party myself. (28)

However, Melinda's voicelessness worsens over time. Halfway through the novel, Melinda is able to acknowledge her voicelessness as a legitimate issue, but also recognizes that it is affecting every part of her life, occurring frequently regardless of whether or not she has been externally reminded of her trauma—rather, it is as though her trauma has consumed her, and she never has a moment when she isn't thinking and controlled by it.

It is getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache. Sometimes my mouth relaxes around Heather, if we're alone. Every time I try to talk to my parents or a teacher, I sputter or freeze. What is wrong with me? It's like I have some kind of spastic laryngitis.

I know my head isn't screwed on straight. ... I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. (51)

This excerpt demonstrates not only her battle with voicelessness but also the beginning hints of her altered sense of self. Readers can pick up on this by paying attention to phrases reflecting how she sees herself: "What is wrong with me?" and "I know my head isn't screwed on straight." This new perception of self is furthered in another interaction. While spending time with Heather, a new student who is overly eager

to get ahead and fit in, Melinda notes the way in which her own carefree and motivated personality has changed so drastically so quickly.

[Heather] opens her soda. “What are your goals, Mel?”

I used to be like Heather. Have I changed that much in two months? She is happy, driven, aerobically fit. She has a nice mom and an awesome television. But she’s like a dog that keeps jumping into your lap. She always walks with me down the halls chattering a million miles a minute.

My goal is to go home and take a nap. (24)

In another example, Melinda grapples with mild dissociation (one of Vickroy’s obstacles) as she comes to dislike seeing herself.

I watch myself in the mirror across the room. Ugh. ... I can’t stop biting my lips.

It looks like my mouth belongs to someone else, someone I don’t even know.

I get out of bed and take down the mirror. I put it in the back of my closet, facing the wall. (17)

Melinda’s trauma narrative comes to its conclusion by demonstrating how she is breaking free from her trauma. Rather than ending up being defined and controlled by it completely, as Katniss is in the beginning of her story, by the end of the novel, Melinda is able to grasp a firmer sense of her own independence and freedom. This allows her to stop isolating herself and to push through the voicelessness. She finally warns her former best friend off of the boy she is now interested in, Andy Evans, in an effort to protect her. She graffiti’s an anonymous list of “Guys to Stay Away From” inside a girls’ bathroom stall and puts his name at the top of the list, which quickly garners comments from girls throughout the school sharing their own stories and warnings regarding him. While the

ex-best friend lashes out against Melinda's warning, the anonymous bonding of girls who have also suffered at this boy's hands gives her strength. Her voicelessness finds its true dissolution when Andy traps her inside a closet and attempts to assault her in an effort to silence her newly vocalized testimony. But while she always only ever involuntarily silenced around Andy and when reminded of the circumstances of the rape, this time these things only fuel her, and she is able to scream and fight back. She gains her triumph over voicelessness—something she only realizes she has when she holds up a broken piece of glass to his throat and recognizes that he cannot speak unless she allows it—when she is able to say the words “I said no” and he is cowed into obeying (195).

If not for the access to Melinda's internal experience, readers would not have fully understood Melinda's struggles with coming to terms with the trauma and the significance of her being able to move past it. By having access to the words she doesn't say, and by understanding what is going on inside Melinda's head and the confusion she struggles with (“Was I raped?” (164)), we better understand the extent of her journey and how far she comes from where we met her to where we leave her.

The filmmakers of the adaptation of *Speak* chose to preserve Melinda's internal experience by using a common technique in films for granting direct access to a character's thoughts. This is the voice-over character narrator. In her book *Invisible Storytellers*, film scholar Sarah Kozloff points out that not only is the voice of a character narrator one of “the more common form[s] of voice-over in fiction films,” it is especially a “staple in literary adaptations” (41). Voice-over character narrators are able to serve multiple functions, but of those that Kozloff listed, I find that the most relevant to my subject matter are the functions of “recreating/referring to a novel's narrative voice” and

enhancing the viewer's experience by "increasing identification with the characters ... and by stressing the individuality and subjectivity of perception and storytelling" (41). In other words, the voice-over character narrator is arguably the film technique that can most closely replicate the narrative voice of a first-person novel, allowing viewers the ability to better identify and understand the characters and their specific story. These functions can, by extension, serve the purposes of truly capturing the essence of a trauma experience. If this is the case, then the voice-over character narrator needs to be able to preserve the character's voicelessness, indicate an altered sense of self and society (which means establishing a point of contrast that will allow viewers to understand how the character's sense has changed) and, at the very least, glimpses into their internal experience so as to have sufficient understanding of their journey through reacting, processing, and responding to their trauma experience. The voice-over character narrator allows the filmmakers to preserve Melinda's voice and perspective, which gives us the access to her internal experience that we need. Now it is only a matter of determining whether or not this technique reaches its potential in communicating Melinda's experience.

However, in addition to the voice-over character narrator, the film also makes use of other techniques such as visual and aural flashbacks and focalized point-of-view shots. For example, when trying to dissect a frog in Biology class (a creature that is on its back, with its limbs spread open and pinned down), the camera shows us Melinda's face looking down at a space below the camera, with eyebrows furrowed and breathing increasing. The camera then turns to the frog. In one shot, it shows us a full-body shot of the frog, and in the next the camera's focus has narrowed onto the frog's hand underneath

the metal pin. As we see this, we hear a faint scream, one we understand is not happening in the classroom because of Melinda's clearly portrayed heightened focus. The first shot is an objective POV shot, showing us what someone else next to Melinda would see. The second is a subjective POV shot, giving viewers a glimpse into what Melinda is seeing in her mind's eye. With the small aural cue in the same shot, we realize she is flashing back to her rape (Brown 138-41).

With regard to voicelessness, the movie is almost completely faithful to the amount of talking Melinda does. Some conversations are word-for-word the same. When they aren't, though, they still capture the spirit of similar instances in the novel. Melinda's limited speaking, of course, means that Melinda as the narrating-I, which is the voice we hear serving as Melinda's internal voice (as opposed to Melinda as the experiencing-I, which is what we see on screen), speaks up when experiencing-Melinda doesn't (Brown 129-33). In one scene, Melinda cuts her thumb during art class. After quickly treating it with water, her teacher, Mr. Freeman, asks another student, Ivy, to escort Melinda to the nurse's office. Ivy is one of Melinda's former friends, who, despite not speaking to her as much now as before, still engages with her and is never unkind. As they leave the classroom and walk down the hall, their dialogue is as follows:

Ivy: "You OK?"

Experiencing-Melinda: "Yeah, I'm fine."

Narrating-Melinda: "Ivy's being nice. Say something. ... My throat is dry. It hurts."

Providing the voice-over means the viewer understands something about the situation that they wouldn't without it. If narrating-Melinda was not speaking, we would

watch these two girls walk away without another word exchanged between them. How does Melinda feel about interacting with Ivy? Does it make her anxious? Is she fearing Ivy thinks she is stupid for having cut herself? Is she relieved someone is talking to her? It may not cross our minds to think Melinda is feeling the pressure to say something—and even if it does, we cannot form any solid understanding of Melinda’s journey because we would not have solid evidence to gather over the course of the film.

While there are no direct words, either from narrating-Melinda or experiencing-Melinda, that indicate her altered perception of herself (like in the novel when she compares herself to Heather), the flashbacks to her night at the party seem to portray it well enough for the viewer’s understanding. We see four different scenarios through flashbacks over the course of the film, and we piece together the story from what we see through Melinda’s memories: there is Melinda leaning out the window of a moving car with her friends as they go to the party, Melinda as Andy Evans flirts with her at the party, Melinda during the rape, and Melinda after the rape (as she phones the police and walks home alone). Rather than being told, we can see for ourselves how much the trauma of the rape took away from Melinda, as she goes from the carefree girl shouting into the wind to the girl we see throughout the film, withdrawn and timid.

Narrating-Melinda grows quieter as experiencing-Melinda regains her voice towards the end of the film. While this removes our ability to see how Melinda is healing from her internal perspective, viewers can assume for themselves that this change indicates that she is recovering, as her voice shifts from being primarily internal to being primarily external. The only thing missing from the defining trauma characteristics is a clear understanding of her altered sense of society. Her comments about no one caring



about what you have to say, as well as other criticisms she sprinkles in throughout the novel about the nature of her fellow classmates, are absent. However, those thoughts and observations are probably the least closely tied to Melinda's primary struggles with her trauma. If adaptations of novels need to eliminate elements for time's sake, this defining characteristic was the safest to drop, as its loss only takes away a smaller element (and less impactful) element of Melinda's trauma. Overall, the film techniques employed by *Speak*'s filmmakers allows for clear access to Melinda's internal experience and gives the viewers the moments of Melinda's responses to trauma necessary to capturing Melinda's trauma narrative and journey.

### **The Morality Argument**

The successful use of both the voice-over character narrator and the protagonist as the sole focalizer to convey private thoughts, flashbacks, and other traumatic reactions (such as Melinda's reaction to the dissected frog) in order to preserve Melinda's trauma narrative according to the defining characteristics of trauma narratives answers my question of whether or not a film can capture the trauma experience. This means that the filmmakers of *The Hunger Games* could have easily done the same. The question that remains is then geared towards the moral aspects of the matter. Since the filmmakers could have preserved the trauma narrative, should they have been required to do so? A popular argument in adaptation studies is that adaptations are creative works of their own, and instead of concerning themselves with maintaining fidelity, adaptors of these works can reinterpret as much as they like in order to create something new. While I don't disagree that there is a place for adaptations that make a story brand new, there are

legitimate concerns that can arise when tackling an adaptation that, in turn, would justify a need for considering fidelity to the original text. The introduction to *The*

*Literature/Film Reader* describes these concerns:

For those who worry about the problems and the process of cinematic adaptation ... questions of fidelity still linger because *any* adaptation will necessarily demonstrate what the medium of film can or cannot achieve in relation to literary sources ... depending upon the imagination of the director and screenwriter. How was the story told? How is it retold? Is point of view a particular problem because of a first-person narrator (however limited by relationship or circumstance) or a third-person omniscient narrator? Is the story completely told? If not, has it been intelligently abridged, but if so, was anything lost as a consequence? (xxiii)

I find the last two questions to be the most relevant to this question. Few novels can be brought to the screen in their entirety, and sometimes (some may argue all of the time) there is no real need to. However, in adapting and thus abridging a text to fit a film, aspects of the story must be lost. It was the decision of the filmmakers of the *Hunger Games* movies to do away with Katniss's internal experience and trauma narrative. An easy excuse is that that choice was within their rights as artists. But consider *Speak*. This novel and its topics made lasting impact on its readers. In the back of some versions of the novel, Anderson provides a Q&A entitled "Laurie Halse Anderson Speaks About *Speak*..." One of the topics she discusses is the letters and emails she received from her readers: "I've learned that *Speak* is not just a book about rape. *Speak* is a book about depression. That is why it has resonated so deeply for so many readers. ... This book reflects their experience and offers them hope" (Anderson). So many of her readers were

either victims of rape, or victims of other experiences that Melinda portrays, such as bullying, abusive parents, depression, crippling shyness, and more. Melinda then becomes two things: she becomes a connection amongst people like her that allows them to find solace in the fact that they are not alone, and she becomes a connection between people like her and those who have not been victims of these things in order to create better understanding and empathy.

What if the filmmakers of *Speak* decided to remove the trauma narrative? It would cease to be a story at all. There might be enough scraps left over to create a shadow of a John Hughes movie, but the meaning and heart and purpose of the story, the connection it provides to everyone both alike and unlike, would be nowhere to be found.

If it would be unthinkable to remove the trauma narrative from *Speak*, it should be equally unthinkable to do so to *The Hunger Games*. Even if *Speak* is rooted solely in the aftermath of trauma while events larger than Katniss's internal struggles occur in *The Hunger Games*, the very fact that *The Hunger Games* novels are consciously written in the first-person—therefore using Katniss specifically as a way to understand the world that Collins brings to life—means that Katniss's understanding of and approach to the world around her is an essential part of the story. Therefore, if Katniss is a character whose every thought is directed in response to her traumatic experience, her trauma narrative is essential to her being the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* story. To preserve Katniss's role as the focal point of *The Hunger Games* films and yet remove her trauma narrative is to erase not a trivial element of the story, but an element that has purpose.

What is that purpose? To loop back to the beginning of this thesis, I highlighted Collins's incorporation of her family's struggles with traumatic events into *The Hunger*

*Games*. Her stories are no longer merely fiction, but a connection to an essential part of history that this generation may not have clear access to.

Let us argue for a moment that Katniss is solely the representation of veterans of the Vietnam War. She, like they, was a teenager forced by the government to kill for its sake. She, like Collins's father and my grand-uncle and so many others, returned safe but haunted by nightmares and an inability to speak about what it did to her. I can't ask my grand-uncle about what he suffered, and even if I could, I doubt he would be able to give me enough access to his experience to the point where I could fully understand and have empathy for what he went through. But I can read a novel like *The Hunger Games*, and stories like Collins's can serve as the bridge between those who cannot express themselves and those who cannot understand without the story being expressed.

But Katniss doesn't just serve as a representation of Vietnam veterans. She also represents the starvation and poverty of those during the Depression and those who suffer it to this day. She represents the children throughout history who have lost a parent and had to grow up too soon to provide and protect, or lost so many loved ones that the grief seems impossible to bear. Michelle Balaev, in the same article I referred to earlier, describes what the fictional protagonist of a trauma narrative can be:

The trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people ... Indeed, a significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender, have collectively experienced massive trauma. (155)

When the filmmakers removed the trauma narrative from *The Hunger Games* stories, they took away an essential aspect of Collins's story. Perhaps they had no real responsibility to preserve the trauma narrative. But while they may not have had an obligation, they did have an opportunity to connect the trauma of a group of people—Vietnam and other war veterans, Americans during the Depression, the poor in every country, and so many more—to those who might not be able to understand without experiencing it themselves. *The Hunger Games* novels were massively popular on their own. By bringing it to the big screen, there was not only an opportunity for these filmmakers to create mainstream films that would tackle the difficulties and long-lasting impacts of trauma, but also an opportunity to have sent waves of relevant and significant conversation amongst demographics that would have ignored it entirely, as they have done. It amazes me how many cannot see the narrative at the heart of this story. I have found none in the academic world who examine the trauma narrative of either the novels or the films of *The Hunger Games*, and too few observations of it in real life or internet discussions. Not only could it have created meaningful conversation, it could have changed the way in which future YA dystopian novels were portrayed in film. Series like *Divergent* and *The Maze Runner* could have taken *The Hunger Games*'s lead in connecting their audiences to their history and to those around them today as *Speak* had been able to do. Instead, they have been reduced to portraying trauma as entertainment, as the Capitol did with their Hunger Games, with only the small shadow of a spark for enlightening conversations.

## Conclusion

Though I had initially assumed bringing to life the internal experience was an impossible task for films, thus preventing the preservation of Katniss's trauma narrative in *The Hunger Games* films, seeing *Speak*'s trauma narrative successfully captured and communicated in its movie adaptation demonstrated to me that there are at least a few techniques available for filmmakers who wish to properly convey a trauma narrative in the inherently third-person medium. I imagine further study of other trauma films, whether adapted from a first-person novel or not, would allow for a continually developing understanding of what other techniques would be successful in capturing the defining characteristics of the trauma narrative in accordance to trauma theory.

Now that knowing capturing the trauma narrative is possible, what remains is the challenge. This lies on not only the authors and filmmakers, but the readers and viewers too.

For the artists, I argue that the challenge is two-fold: the first is ensuring that trauma narratives are represented in order to create art that contributes rather than merely entertains; the second is ensuring that, when attempting to convey a trauma narrative, that it maintains the voicelessness and altered sense of both self and society as embedded, accessed, and understood through the internal experience, and is focalized around the protagonist in order to recreate the true traumatic experience of an individual in real life. That being said, I imagine over time that art will come to reflect new ways in which to enable understanding the trauma experience past the characteristics I have defined in this thesis, and I look forward to the exploration and expanding definition of the trauma narrative.

For the audience, I argue that the challenge is, when consuming art regarding trauma, to work for finding the connection between themselves and the art they consume—to dig for active engagement rather than to merely allow for passive entertainment. If, as Balaev remarks, the opportunity of a protagonist in a trauma narrative is to bridge the gap between generations and demographics and cultures and races and genders and every other category that divides people and prevents shared understanding and empathy, then the opportunity of the reader and viewer is to simply cross that bridge.

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