Chapter 3
Staging Sermon:
Performing Autobiographical Memory Through "The Waste Land"

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a self-reflexive evaluation of the Sermon photographs from Waste Land (2005-2010), that was produced by the author for her practice-based PhD. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" (1922) was used to examine her adaptation methodologies and self-representational strategies. Waterman visually translates her own experience of parental divorce through a close analysis of the text and literary criticism (Brooker and Bentley, Ellman, Miller, Parsons), acknowledging her biographical connections to Eliot's marriage to Vivienne Haigh Wood, to produce cathartic re-enactments, informed by photo-therapy (Martin, Spence), memory and trauma studies (Barthes, Freud, Kaplan), feminine metaphors (Gilbert and Gubar, Horner and Zlosnik), and photographic self-portraiture (Chadwick, Lingwood). By interweaving these cross-disciplinary strands and reflecting on the actual process of making each photograph through a unique auto-criticism, Waterman demonstrates how her autobiographical literary interpretations offer a means of restaging memory through the creation of photographic narratives.

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING AN ADAPTATION METHODOLOGY

Over the last 26 years I have established an interdisciplinary arts practice that employs literary adaptation as a mechanism for self-representation. My adaptation methodology was investigated through a visual interpretation of T.S Eliot's seminal poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), as part of my practice-based doctoral study[1]. I had originally formed a strong personal connection with Eliot's poem as a 17 year old, during my A' levels, whereby I associated my experience of parental marital breakdown, with the disturbed characters and melancholic mood embedded within Eliot's text. My adaptation process, which began 13 years later, led to the production of *Waste Land* (2005-2010), a collection of 12 video and photographic works, created through an emotional embodiment of the source text to communicate memories of my

past trauma[2]. As a result of my practice-based research, I recognised how a, "…conscious 'letting go', not only of the burden of fidelity to the source text, but also a lack of inhibition of communicating the deeply personal issue of family breakdown" (Waterman, 2019, p.161), that was particularly evident in the later works I produced, was crucial to their success. This highly reflective research strategy led to an identification of four different approaches to my interpretive method. First, works that are based upon isolated, fragmented lines from the poem, second; a re-scripting exercise, through an amalgamation of several lines; third, those works that are inspired by a specific action, character, or image and lastly, an identification with conceptual or thematic concerns within the text (Waterman, 2019, pp.157-58). This adaptation methodology became an effective device for the masking of autobiographical experience, producing the necessary emotional distance and operating as a form of self-protection. My interpretation of the poem also offers a gendered 'talking back' to Eliot by proposing an androgynous self-representation that transcends his uneasiness with the female form, as well as more perceptibly, a 'talking back' to my father which I will explore further on.

Upon embarking on this project, I drew upon certain literary criticism to provide an art historical reading, such as, Korg (1960), Richardson (1969), Schwartz (1985) and Brooker & Bentley (1992) to fully comprehend its rich symbolism and modernist context, as well as consulting Eliot's published writing, letters and biographies, such as Brooker (2004), Eliot (1932, 1957 and 1988), Ellman (1987), Gordon (2000), Kermode (1975), Miller (1977) and Olney (1994), to determine the autobiographical reasoning behind the poem's production. My initial research also included an examination of conventional film adaptation theory, in particular, Bluestone (1957), Wagner (1975), Kline (1996), Cartmell and Whelehan (1999) and Hutcheon (2006) to gain an insight into the varying latitude of translation and the different modes available to the adaptor. My experiments in the early stage of my practice-based research adopted Geoffrey Wagner's three modes of adaptation; 'transposition', 'commentary' and 'analogy' (Wagner, 1975, p.221), as a methodological framework. This practice-led process of testing out, raised concerns regarding the problem of literalness, or making work that was too detached or unrecognisable from the text, becoming too caught up with stylistic concerns and literary criticism, or, on the other hand, producing dense works with inaccessible, multi-layered meanings (Waterman, 2019). Through this active, cyclical method of constantly oscillating between theory and practice, seeking out autobiographical connections to the poem, and scrutinizing my experiments, it was discovered that the fragmentary extraction of autobiographical connections with the text, operated as a means of projection for enabling the recollection and re-imagining of previously repressed memories. In this respect, Eliot's poem acted as a channelling device to deal with my experience of parental marital breakdown, divorce and consequent estrangement from my father.

As a gallery installation, the five distinctive sections of *The Waste Land* poem[3] are maintained as separate spaces that experientially represent different stages of my self-examination of family trauma. The image/text photographic series, *Sermon* (2008-2009) (Figure 1-9), adapted from part three of Eliot's poem, *The Fire Sermon*, portrays the emotional aftermath of my parents' separation and the disclosure of my father's infidelities and alleged sexual abuse against a cousin, as a direct response to Eliot's reference to Buddha's sermon against the fires of lust and his portrayal of the typist's seduction. *Sermon* is made up of a collection of four diptychs; *Vol. I Encounter* (2008), *Vol. II Contemplation* (2008), *Vol. III Disintegration* (2008), *Vol. IV Reverberation* (2009) and the final singular image, *Vol. V Retribution* (2009). Each of the nine photographs are derived from an edited line from the poem, which is written underneath and also forms their individual title, creating a dialogue between image and text through genres of self-portraiture, landscape and still life (see Figures 1-10). The *Sermon* photographs signi-

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