

Representing the Unrepresentable: Trauma in *Rocketman*

Lida Shams-Mostofi



Lida Shams-Mostofi's video essay "Representing the Unrepresentable: Trauma in *Rocketman*" delves into the representation of trauma in the biographical musical film *Rocketman* (2019), reflecting traumatic flashbacks of disturbing video sequences. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-bannover.de/nodes/lkexM>.

Creator's Statement

This videographic essay analyzes the representation of trauma in *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019). The biographical musical film pictures the personal life and struggles of the protagonist Elton John (portrayed by Taron Egerton). In its exploration of the traumatic experiences of the protagonists, *Rocketman* often employs fictional scenes to portray the intricacy of their individual experiences. My videographic essay focuses on the implementation of fictionalized scenes to investigate how deeply trauma and fiction go hand in hand. I argue that the processing of trauma is shown in close connection to Elton John's creativity and musical career. Through the implementation of fantastic scenes and (auto)-biographical fragments, the biopic by Dexter Fletcher aestheticizes trauma to establish it as a driving force for creative evolution.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, a trauma theorist, argues that trauma constitutes an event that "cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (*Trauma* 153), resulting in the unprocessed memory that reoccurs in the form of flashbacks. In this video essay, I aimed to mirror

those flashbacks by deliberately disrupting video sequences with carefully crafted fictional scenes from the movie, and thus imitating the experience of flashbacks. According to Caruth, trauma cannot be regarded as a normal memory, which is why the mind might respond with uncontrollable hallucinations (*Unclaimed* 11). Accordingly, each emotionally demanding situation of Elton John's life is integrated into a musical piece, indicating music as a hallucinational escape and creativity as a way to be able to cope with remembering the traumatic past. Moreover, the interplay between musical representation and Elton John's coping mechanisms serves as both a rehabilitative outlet to process a traumatic memory or history and emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between creativity and psychological resilience. As including entire musical numbers would have consumed too much time in the video essay, I made use of special effects to distort certain video sequences to simulate hallucinatory experiences. Additionally, I looped two video sequences and overlapped several audio tracks to imitate the traumatic response that particular situations will haunt the affected person repeatedly (4). I intend to show that the motif of proving oneself worthy of love is strongly recognizable and very prominent in the protagonist's behavior throughout the biopic, which suits the American psychologist David Henry Feldman's observation that some artists have the "need to prove that one is worthy of respect and admiration [...] or to provide refuge from trauma" (175).

Overall, *Rocketman* represents traumatic events consistently in an aestheticized and fictionalized manner. It displays the movie's intentional creative choices that contribute to the development of the audience's engagement and a sophisticated examination of the interaction between trauma, creative expression, and the construction of personal narratives. The filmic choices of slow-motion effects and the changing of lighting highlight traumatic scenes as hallucinations while simultaneously making emotionally challenging situations more entertaining for viewers. I highlighted those scenes in particular to point out how *Rocketman* manages to depict trauma in a highly aestheticized manner throughout the film. However, it is important to question whether or not trauma should be aestheticized to begin with and to keep in mind that this bears the danger of glorifying trauma.

Author Biography

Lida Shams-Mostofi (she/her) is a student assistant and master student in the division of American Studies and the Teacher Training Program at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a B.A. in English and History. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on critical race theory, autotheory, film, feminism, intersectionality, and gender studies.

Works Cited

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