Journal Article

Choking on the Splinters: Art, The Body, and Processes of Adaptation in the Work of Tom de Freston

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Figure 1 Process, alone.

Oxford, August 11th 2013. 7 pm.

I'm standing in the bathroom naked, looking at myself in the mirror. I'm wet with sweat and red faced. There's the salty taste of blood in my mouth, I spit it into the sink. There is a small graze on the side of my head, I wipe it clean with a wet cotton pad. Chuck cold water across my face. A slight sting. My knees and elbows are raw, skin pulled away. There are small bruises across my torso, a deep, bluing bruise on my hip, sore to the press. A rash across my chest. Splinters embedded in my palms and the soles of my feet. I remove them one by one.[1]

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[1] Tom de Freston, Wreck (unpublished draft, October 6, 2018), 29, n.b. These excerpts and all images are used by kind permission of de Freston, referenced accordingly. For b/w reproduction, Figures 1, 5, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 25 are originally b/w, all other images are color. The two autobiographical drafts cited (dated October 16, 2017 and October 6, 2018) are unpublished elements utilized to further highlight the nature of process, fluidity, textual destruction, and layering within these works.

This excerpt from Tom de Freston's upcoming autobiographical work, <u>Wreck</u>, used here in an attempt to illustrate and perhaps immerse ourselves in the visceral, sweaty, near-primal method the artist utilizes in the creation of his pieces. It is a fragment. Unpublished and unseen, in fact, edited out, no longer a part of the whole—an embryonic and abandoned element of a larger body of work in-progress. A captured moment in-text of the aftermath of creation, as we see a literal <u>body of work</u> now tired, injured, bleeding, and fragile. This is the hidden evidence of the art, the buried text behind the frame; the body challenged, scored, and altered by process. We sit and read, observe, and pick at the splinters. This paper seeks to observe such process in the work of de Freston, how it has evolved, and what it might say regarding notions of adaptation.

Figures 2-3. Framed and adapted.

De Freston's practice is "dedicated to the construction of multimedia worlds, combining paintings, film and performance into immersive visceral narratives."[2] Recent work includes a collaborative exploration of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice with his wife, the poet and novelist Kiran Millwood Hargrave. Orpheus and Eurydice—a graphic-poetic exploration combines art by de Freston and poetry by Hargrave. The book provides an alternative insight into the Orphean journey through Tom's visuals, while also giving voice and agency to Eurydice (elements she often lacks in retellings) through Kiran's words. In addition, critical responses to the myth and the text itself were provided by a variety of academics and creatives; these were intermingled within the chapters, providing variant axes of interpretation to the text itself. The book was not the end, for after all, Orpheus is the "artist

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[2] Tom de Freston, "Tom de Freston," accessed August 20, 2019, https://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/#prettyPhoto

whose song continues beyond his narrative ending," it being one element in a "multidisciplinary, collaborative retelling" that spiralled into performance, painting, music, and a short film that granted an extension to the narrative, detailing events after the book itself, a postscript of O and E.[3]

Similar textual explorations and multi-media activity took place within the Demons Land project, a collaboration with academic and writer Simon Palfrey and filmmaker Mark Jones.[4] Integrating painting, film, sculptures, and digital drama, Demons Land reimagines Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene. The central question set by the collaborators within this adaptation was "what would it mean, in all its beautiful horrifying actuality, if a poem was to actually come to life?"[5] That new "life" of the work, now adapted, portrays a

> dystopian, hellish world through which viewers can reflect on the nightmarish depths
> of the human soul, and why people act as they do—not only in hallucinatory figments
> of the imagination but in the real-world phenomena of genocide, fascism and abuse.[6]

As a process of adaptation, the method here would indicate an approach of plurality and what it might mean to explode myth, art, poetry, history, and collapse the retellings into a "scattering of matter from which we can build new forms."[7] The orginatory text is used in these instances to spawn a myriad of voices, a malleable sequence of works orbiting around a central core.

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[3] See Julie Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 70; Tom de Freston and Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Orpheus and Eurydice: A Graphic-Poetic Exploration (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), xi.

[4] Tom de Freston, "Demons Land: A Poem Come True," accessed August 20, 2019, https://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/works/demonsland

[5] de Freston, "Demons Land."

[6] Tom de Freston, in Christiana Spens interview, "Depicting Demons with Tom de Freston," accessed August 20, 2019, https://elephant.art/depicting-demons-with-tom-de-freston/.

[7] Tom de Freston, "Tom de Freston—About," accessed July 21, 2015 (now updated, no longer in this form). http://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/cv. See also Tom de Freston, "OE at 47/49 Tanner Street," accessed August 20, 2019, http://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/5898/oe-at-4749-tanner-street; Battersea Arts Centre, "Sleep furiously: step inside artist Tom de Freston's nightmarish bedroom," accessed August 20, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2016/apr/20/tom-de-freston-artist-bedroom-battersea-arts-centre-bac-video.

Figures 4-7. Transformative bodies.

Adaptation may be viewed in this sense as an

> exploration of the processes of change that happen as one or more cultural artifacts move across medial and disciplinary boundaries to inhabit the space of another; and in that process, previously discrete boundaries become porous as the new artifact inhabits the space in-between media, disciplines and art forms—traditional and contemporary.[8]

My research focuses on such cross-pollination, upon a fascination with how texts migrate and manoeuvre, and of the processes at play in those adaptive transformations.

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[8] Freda Chapple, "Pedagogy and Policy in Intermedial Adaptations," in <u>Redefining Adaptation Studies</u>, ed. Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, & James M. Welsh (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 55-70, 55.

As scholars of adaptation such as Robert Stam, Sarah Cardwell, John O. Thompson and Linda Hutcheon (to name just a few) note, the history of adaptational discourse has been problematic and seen as often revolving around a "relationship of dependency" between source-text and adapted media.[9] As Thompson notes, this relationship is not neutral but carries with it the frequent implication that the original is superior, or "more cognitively demanding," than its adaptation; that the conversion is but a "deformation or dilution of the original."[10] Stam adds that "the language of criticism dealing with the film adaptation of novels has often been profoundly moralistic, awash in terms such as infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration, each accusation carrying its specific charge of outraged negativity."[11] The force of such language highlights the notion of an adaptation in any form, as noted by Hutcheon, as "likely to be greeted as minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the 'original.'"[12]

Such critics as those mentioned, challenge potential hierarchies and delineations of worth, as Cardwell argues, "just as adaptations have moved away from their source books, so too must the approach through which we consider them . . . comparison is an inadequate starting point for the interpretation, analysis and evaluation of individual adaptations."[13] For many critics, the observation of lines of interconnectedness, the interweaving of texts through medial and cultural boundaries, has provided a rich textual seam to mine. As illustrated by Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins, whose focus is upon how texts "form and inform each other," the approach is not one of textual oppositions but of an appreciation of texts moving across media and culture, be it novel to film, Broadway play to game, or body to canvas.[14] De Freston himself, in his collaborations, does not view a superiority of one mode over another, stating, "There was no top-down hierarchy between the makers of the mediums," each was to

[9] See Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in Film Adaptation, ed. James Naremore (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2000), 54-76, 54; Sarah Cardwell, Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel (United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2002); John O. Thompson, "Vanishing Worlds: Film Adaptation and the Mystery of the Original," in Pulping Fictions: Consuming Culture Across the Literature/Media Divide, ed. Deborah Cartmell et al. (London: Pluto Press, 1996); Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006); Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins, "Introduction: New Beginnings for Adaptation Studies," in Adaptation Studies: New Approaches, ed. Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins, (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 16-22, 21.
[10] Thompson, 11.
[11] Stam, 54.
[12] Hutcheon, xii.
[13] Cardwell, 207.
[14] Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins, 15.

speak to one another.[15] In place of a vertical alignment, there is dialogue and conjoined activity; in this process, "the 'work' no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process."[16]

If the perceived hierarchical nature of adaptation has proven challenging, the very term, adaptation, has also proven difficult to pinpoint precisely. Julie Sanders raises the distinctions of adaptation and appropriation. She states that an adapted text is that which holds a specific, identifiable, and tangible relationshop to the source material, while an appropriated text may have a somewhat unclear or pliable orginatory point and may manipulate the original through genre, theme, or content.[17] Hutcheon provides some limits, placing adaptation as "an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work."[18] She also asks what adaptation is not, for example, where does sampled music sit in relation to adaptations? We may also ask how do collage and bricolage function? Are scatterings and repurposed ephemera to be excluded because of their multiform nature? Does the text reside in the final, stated outcome of a work of bricolage or in the many pieces which make up the whole? What of performance, where the work is fluid and changeable? How can emergent technologies be framed by such theory? How is this further complicated by user agency? The search for a definition is paralleled by a metamorphosis of texts across media (which are ever evolving)—the ongoing quest, and the changability of texts, are perhaps not mutually exclusive.

Elsewehere, distinctions are raised that often rest upon identifying not what something is, but what something is not. Hutcheon provides a continuum of adaptation by degree or scale, which runs through "recreations that put an aesthetic premium on fidelity to the original text like literary translations and transcriptions of orchestral music for piano to condensations and abridgments," through to "adaptation proper," which resides in the center of this gradation.[19] Thomas Leitch attempts to dig deeper into definable definitions, moving through the "axiom that adaptation is a subset of intertextuality—all adaptations are obviously intertexts, but it is much less obvious that all intertexts are adaptations." [20] Intertexts being instances of works that

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[15] de Freston, in Spens interview.
[16] Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," in Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art, ed. Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 38-63, 43.
[17] Sanders.
[18] Hutcheon, 170.
[19] See Hutcheon, 171; Thomas Leitch "Adaptation and Intertextuality, or, What isn't an Adaptation, and What Does it Matter?" in A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation (Oxford: Black Publications, 2012), 87-104, 87.
[20] Leitch, "Adaptation and Intertextuality," 89.

"borrow, rework, and adapt each other in complex ways."[21] Leitch moves on to provide nine different accounts that challenge definitions within the field. For example, adaptations are exclusively cinematic, an approach where "everything but film is eliminated from the field of study", which, as he so succinctly notes, eliminates emergent media, opera, ballets, and raises troubling implications in regard to textual superiorities (as I have outlined previously).[22] His examples move through intermediality, ekphrases, audience response, translations, performance—each of which are probed in their capacity to shed light on particular aspects of study in the field.

However, this detailed exploration of how adaptation may be defined is perhaps most notable for its conclusion, which is deliberately inconclusive. Leitch states, if we begin to

> distinguish adaptations from the other texts they most closely resemble and then attempt to define the genus of which adaptations are a species, our choice of boundaries will define the field from the outside in, and we face the problem of rationalizing the field we have fenced in.[23]

Hence, a restriction of the field itself, and barriers or limits to how texts are read and understood. He goes on

> After reviewing the problems involved in organizing the discipline more rigorously, adaptation scholars may well decide to defer the question of what isn't an adaptation indefinitely. After all, no matter how they answer that question, they will be imposing new disciplinary constraints on a field that may well flourish more successfully when a thousand flowers bloom.[24]

Kamilla Elliott shares a similar view in her overview of the field, stating of adaptations (and in particular, the importance of practice to shape theory), "Their ability to surprise supersedes the value of theory to predict, as their surprises produce innovation rather than repetition without

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[21] Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins, 19.
[22] Leitch, "Adaptation and Intertextuality," 90-91.
[23] Ibid, 103.
[24] Ibid.

variation."[25] The onus is placed on the adaptation to adapt, as distinct to theory that frames, constricts, or places limits; an approach of "decenteredness, comprehensiveness and flexibility," both in terms of theory and practice.[26]

Taking the above into account, and utilizing Sanders's motifs of adaptation and appropriation, de Freston's multidisciplinary text spoken of earlier, <u>Orpheus and Eurydice—a graphic-poetic exploration</u> simultaneously declares itself as both an <u>adaptation</u> of a source text that indicates a specific relationship to another work or works, and also as <u>appropriation</u>, or exploration. <u>Demons Land</u> functions in a comparable fashion, acknowledging an allegiance to the respective source texts, in title and in action, while also embracing the potentials for exploration beyond the frameworks of the originals themselves. Crane and Hutchings's statement that "all adaptations are complex analogies . . . adaptations, rather than being handicapped by their movements away from the earlier text, are often enabled by them" would seem to be applicable here.[27] Leitch states that "texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten"—therefore we might see a <u>text</u> as being a work in itself and also as a point of connection, a node in a greater network spiralling across form and media.[28] Nicolas Bourriaud's examination of relationships between user and textual artefact focuses on such re-use or rewriting of media, that a text

> does not position itself as the termination point of the "creative process" (a "finished product" to be contemplated) but as a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities. We tinker with production, we surf on a network of signs, we insert our forms on existing lines.[29]

The existing lines are the tracks of texts, to be re-laid by the adapter. The form in question here, is the body.

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[25] Kamilla Elliott, "Theorizing Adaptations/Adapting Theories," in <u>Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions</u>, ed. Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen (London: Continuum Publishing, 2013), 19-45, 38.
[26] Cardwell, 25.
[27] Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins, 16.
[28] Thomas Leitch, <u>Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ</u> (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 12.
[29] Nicolas Bourriaud, <u>Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World</u> (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), 19.

Figures 8-10. Self in motion, adrift.

Using daubed paint, clay, found objects, and ephemera—de Freston operates as the blank agent used "to stage photographic tableaux. The process is often quite performative, in order to allow imagery and ideas to evolve."[30] He states:

> I generate new images and ideas for paintings through a series of processes, each designed to interrogate and adapt the material. Performance is key. I will often inhabit

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[30] Tom de Freston, in Laura Bushell interview, "Tom De Freston: On Falling," accessed July 20, 2019, http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/11403/1/tom-de-freston-on-falling.

a character, photographing sessions of role-play and improvisation. Sometimes I will make puppets, masks, stage sets and maquettes to develop characters, architecture and moments. The photographs act as documents to draw from, and then in turn to make collages and digital montages. Each iteration feeds into the other, spawning new material, all with a view to providing a scaffold for the painting itself.[31]

His physical presence becomes "extended through space. A body where costume and scenery merge, where anatomic and spatial geometric forms become a single form of nature and culture," a physicality that is now a prototype, a conjunction of method, space, and text.[32] The process presents

the body as a stage, paint dragged across the skin, violating the figures and pushing the form towards abstraction . . . an attempt to get under the skin, to turn the bodies inside out.[33]

The text is worn, enabling a dialogue, allowing entrance into the text-form itself, a crack in the shell of the tale through physical transformations. The presence of the artist in such images extends notions of both text and adaptation, as it signals a view of adaptation that is not singular, of text to (alternate) media, but multiple. Such multiplicity is illustrated through the kaleidoscopic adaptational activity mentioned previously in such reimaginings of <u>Orpheus</u> and <u>The Faerie Queene</u> but is also present in the manner of how these works are created. The body here is a point of transition, and also a canvas and frame. It is displayed, a moment captured as material flows from one form into another, a resonance rippling under the final work or works. It may be viewed as a text in itself, emerging Golem-like, a space to be written on and altered, a line of connection between fragments of a larger meta-text.[34]

Layers of text and process are peeled back and made bare, exposed and becoming un-hidden through Twitter, website, and Instagram posts. De Freston reveals, to borrow from Wolfgang Iser, the unseen "gaps" that permit an insight into the process and mechanism of

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[31] de Freston, "Tom de Freston—About."

[32] Maria Luia Palumbo, <u>New Wombs: Electronic Bodies and Architectural Disorders</u> (Berlin: Birkhauser, 2000), 18.

[33] Tom de Freston, <u>Wreck</u> (unpublished draft, October 16, 2017), 13.

[34] Cardwell, 25.

artifacts.[35] For Iser, these textual "gaps" permit a deeper level of communication, allowing entrance into the work to facilitate an "interactive dialogue between work, viewer, and their respective contexts."[36] In place of what is present in an adaptation, we might instead think in terms of, as Leitch suggests, not "what it faithfully reproduces . . . but what it leaves out."[37] These once orphaned and absent works of sometimes bloody process now become present, embracing "deformation, violation, and desecration" of form as transformative process—and illustrating The Text as not singular but only a partial element of the whole. What is excised or (more generally) unseen, also possesses life in the fabric and body of the work itself.

Figures 11-12. Scenes from The Charnel House and Orpheus and the Minotaur.[38]

Within his creations, de Freston frequently interlaces manifold scattered narratives, blending history, politics, news, myth, sex. He states that he has

> always taken historical sources as start points, from literature, myth and art. I'm drawn to moments of rupture, fragments of stories that contain multitudes, that seem to carry the weight of entire histories within one instance. Paintings offer a chance to express these vertiginous gaps in the horizontal flow of a narrative. It means paintings are a kind of wound, so it's no surprise the subject matter I am drawn to is often similarly focused on trauma and violence; historical, political and physical.[39]

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[35] Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 169.
[36] Iser, 169.
[37] Leitch, Film Adaptation and Its Discontents, 18.
[38] See Tom de Freston, The Charnel House (Suffolk: Bridgedoor Press, 2014), 19-20; Tom de Freston, "Orpheus and the Minotaur—Breese Little Gallery," accessed July 20, 2019, https://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/5599/orpheus-and-the-minotaur-breese-little-gallery.
[39] de Freston, Wreck (2018), 3.

Such points of loss are repeatedly turned to—savage cuts that provide an entry point of exploration, of possibility, where textual flesh is pulled apart, allowing a "tear or wound, laid open in the side of the real."[40] Stories fall and slip, weave through one another into a space where history, narrative, and myth collide. Forms are stretched, textual edges blur—territorial pissings that splash into the next frame of minotaurs and kaleidoscopes, hellscapes and chessboards.

Figures 13-14. Excerpts from <u>On Falling</u>. "Lear and the Fool" (2011), oil on canvas 180 x 120 cm. "Waterboarding" (2011), oil on canvas, 200 x 140 cm.[41]

In these spaces, the minotaur of legend is crucified, we see Lear become an anonymous shape, kicked free of the earth, naked upon the heath, while the Fool cowers below under the pain of an unforgiving sky. Elsewhere, dioramas of torture and stress are played out as characters are waterboarded in Guantanamo-esque scenarios.

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[40] Rosemary Jackson, <u>Fantasy—the Literature of Subversion</u> (London: Routledge, 1981), 22.
[41] Tom de Freston, <u>On Falling</u> (London: Breese Little, 2011), 10-11.

Figures 15-16. Drawings from <u>On Falling</u>.[42]
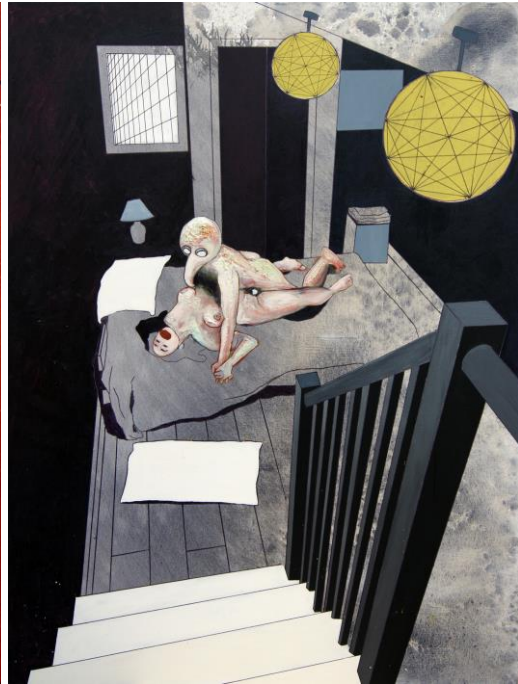
Figures 17-18. Excerpts from <u>On Falling</u>. "Birdsong" (2011), oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. "Dead Son" (2011), oil on canvas 200 x 150 cm.[43]

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[42] de Freston, <u>On Falling,</u> 24-25.
[43] Ibid, 17-18.

In another nameless place, sketched characters fuck in empty rooms, where "the safety of the domestic is polluted to create something unhomely, familiar but strange," in an atmosphere "interrupted and infested by a white noise of psychological unrest and alienation."[44] In Dead Son (2011) "the aerial view suspends a moment of familial grief, leaving the viewer feeling uncomfortably voyeuristic, the blood red endowing the scene with the needless tragedy of war."[45] People die, life, of sorts, goes on, and we watch the horror and glistening insanity of it all.

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[44] Tom de Freston and Andrea Porter, House of the Deaf Man (Suffolk: Gatehouse Press, 2012), vii.
[45] Christiana Spens, "The Aesthetics of Violence in the Work of Tom de Freston," accessed July 20, 2019, https://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/4784/christiana-spens-the-aesthetics-of-violence-in-the-work-of-tom-de-freston.
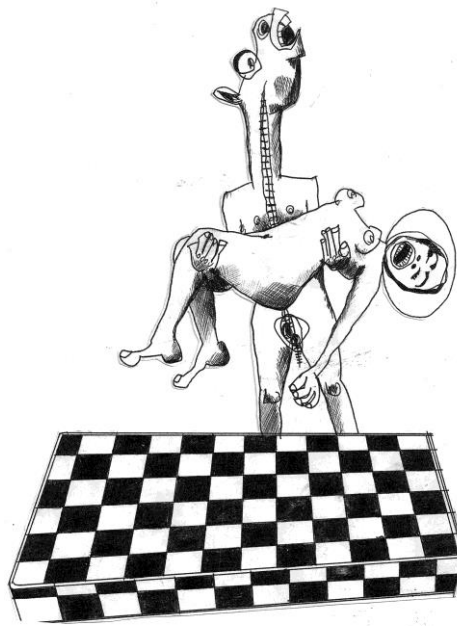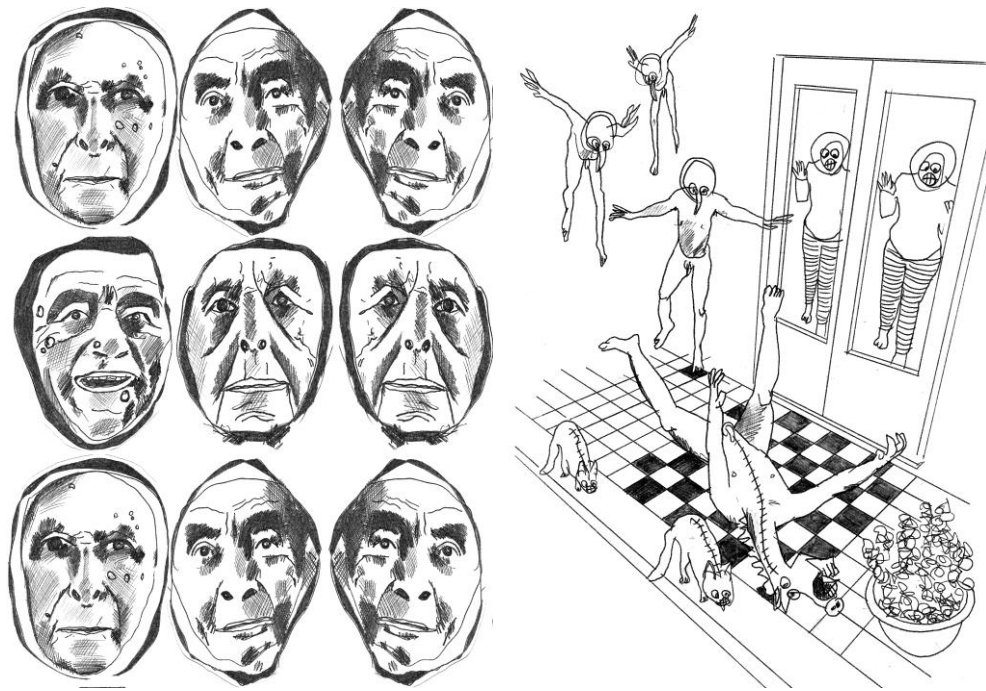
Figures 19-21. Excerpts from <u>House of the Deaf Man</u>.[46]

The horsehead figure carries us back to the cover of de Freston's 2012 collaborative work with the poet Andrea Porter. The figure, "directly quoting Picasso's <u>Guernica</u>," "nods to the terror of war, the collapsing of ideologies and the absurdity of an increasingly unstable psychological state."[47] It repeats throughout many of the artist's works between 2008 and 2014,

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[46] de Freston and Porter, 37-39.
[47] Ibid, vii.

appearing here in <u>House of the Deaf Man</u>, and perhaps most dominantly in the ekphrastic collection entitled <u>The Charnel House</u> (2014). This figure was formed due to de Freston's desire to "create a central protagonist which was absolutely other, and then to build a world and a fragmented narrative around this character."[48]

Within <u>House of the Deaf Man</u>, that chaotic world is "mutated and restaged" through the latter days of the artist Goya—of his five-year stay in Madrid in Quinta del Sordo (<u>The House of the Deaf Man</u>).[49] Goya, having already almost totally lost his hearing by this point, painted a series of fourteen paintings directly onto the walls of the house—these paintings came to be known as the <u>Black Paintings</u>. De Freston's work focuses upon the "eroticism and horror" of the black paintings, together with recognition of the Spanish artist's deafness—a "cruel manifestation" of wider psychological and sociological horrors.[50] The works of the Spanish painter are transformed and used as reference points of the modern world—of spectacles of violence and pornography, of monsters emerging into our space, our frame. Rupert Murdoch is depicted as the puppet-master, the model for a series of theatrical masks.[51] The horsehead is tormented, torn, and prone—falling through a world that watches and offers nothing.

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[48] "Strife Journal: Interview with Tom de Freston," accessed September 10, 2019, http://www.tomdefreston.co.uk/artist/5743/tom-de-freston-2009-2014.
[49] de Freston and Porter, vii.
[50] Ibid, vii.
[51] Ibid.

Figures 22-24. Excerpts from <u>The Charnel House</u>.[52]

Made manifest once again in <u>The Charnel House</u>, the horsehead whirls and tumbles in "paintings concerned with water-boarding, public (and private) violence, and ideas of dehumanisation and pain."[53] A sense of mayhem and inevitability prevails as the primary protagonist is placed on a slab, strung up, or made to feel insufferable grief.

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[52] de Freston, <u>The Charnel House</u>.
[53] Spens, "The Aesthetics of Violence."

Grief marks the commencement of <u>Orpheus and Eurydice—a graphic poetic exploration</u>. This version of the Orpheus myth sees O as inconsolable, frantic, clutching to memories of lovemaking with Eurydice, to strip away the void of loss. Orpheus wants to enter the text, to break its barriers.

> O wakes and in one breath remembers it all. He remembers E, her life, her poetry, her death; all violently presenting themselves back to him in an instance. He finds and reads her retelling of Orpheus and Eurydice, wants to climb into it, to unmake it. O decides, with unflinching certainty, that he is Orpheus and he must rescue E. O will bring back E from death. But first, he must find the Underworld.[54]
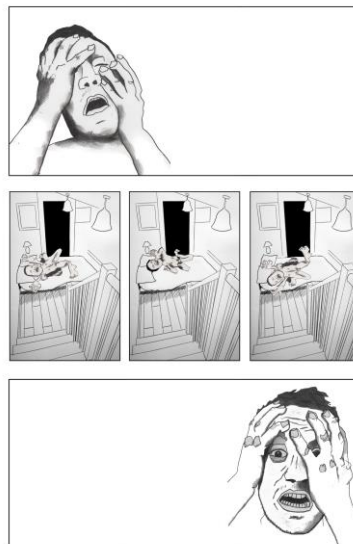

Figure 25. Excerpt from <u>Orpheus and Eurydice: A Graphic-Poetic Exploration</u>.[55]

The minotaur, from another myth, another space, is his guide—as they fall through frames of existence. Notably, in previous works, such as <u>On Falling</u>, <u>House of the Deaf Man</u>, or <u>The Charnel House</u>, de Freston's likeness is hidden, transformed—that adaptation from the photograph, the staged prototype, is recognizably something else—here, it is recognizably the artist. This is a journey into the myth, and also a mark of recent work, of a navigation into the personal—the artist putting himself within the canvas. The preface notes this intimate journey into the underworld in creating the book between Hargrave and de Freston, that it was a process

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[54] de Freston and Hargrave, 6.
[55] Ibid, 6-7.

"at times fraught—a dialogue between lovers. It draws on personal experiences of love, depression, grief, and contains something of the work involved in navigating through such terrain."[56]

Such anguish in these works is primarily visited upon the other, be it Orpheus, Lear, or anonymized victims. However, in recent interviews, de Freston has stated that the distance of pain, is perhaps a little closer, stating that he was in:

> total denial about my work having any direct autobiographical content . . . in all kinds of ways painting has saved my life. Now I'm very aware that if I don't paint, my mental health suffers. Once you strip away the intellectualizing, it's clear there's something far deeper and more fundamental about the creative drive.[57]

His forthcoming autobiography, an orphaned excerpt of which began this paper, is an exploration and acknowledgement of such drives. It begins so:

> I suppose this is a ghost story, of sorts.
> The day my father died, I started a series of paintings that would take years to complete. They were inspired by Théodore Géirucalt's Raft of the Medusa (1819), a monumental painting based on a real-life tragedy, depicting a raft full of dead, despairing and desperate men lost at sea. The connection to the painting, the events which inspired it and Géricault's tumultuous biography became an obsession which engulfed my life. Art became the space through which I denied, escaped and eventually confronted grief.[58]

The book utilizes a novelistic biography of Géricault's life, framed by de Freston's memoir. These two central stories are intrinsically intertwined, "interweaving strands and themes which soon start to merge, as the safe distinction between the personal and historical slowly dissolves, the historical bleeds into the personal, or vice-versa. The book is an exploration of how art provides a way into and out of the complexities of grief and trauma."[59] As stated, these are

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[56] de Freston and Hargrave, xii.
[57] de Freston, in Spens interview.
[58] de Freston, Wreck (2018), 3.
[59] Ibid, Wreck (2018), 3.

excerpts, ghosts, if you will, expunged fragments, scattered and adrift—yet provide a view behind the text, a sight of previous incarnations. Erwin Panofsky, ruminating on the function of the humanities, suggests that as a discipline, it is "not faced with the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away, but of enlivening what would otherwise remain dead . . . they penetrate into a region where time has stopped of its own accord, and try to reactivate it."[60] Of adaptations, we can say that any attempt to restage or rewrite a text is a return, a revisit to past histories, dead actors; a litany of agency encased in text, screen, and film. Here, memories of trauma are unearthed, retold, and reframed, orbiting around a central cluster that is reworked, adapted, and layered with the personal; mixed memories formed "through complex layers of tellings through time."[61] Cathy Caruth suggests that

> overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. This singular possession by the past . . . has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time. . . . Trauma . . . does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.[62]

De Freston's writing, his art, his process, is to venture into these spaces, to reshape and reclaim them. Michael Holly suggests that grief and mourning are less like an unhealable wound but more akin to a continual process of layering.[63] That layering here is achieved through ongoing process, the staged body, the photographs documenting those primal moments, the thick paint applied again and again to build a tactile, flowing canvas, and outwards, to be further explored, worked through, outside the frame of the work itself. While underneath the oils, buried in the canvas, unseen in these final works but always present, an absence at the heart of presence, is de Freston.

Regarding adaptations of Orpheus, of which there are many, Neil Gaiman describes his sense of adapting the myth, that it stretches itself like a "wet skin over the frame of each artist's

[60] Erwin Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), 24.

[61] Aisha Farr, "Every Myth Is a Memory, Formed through Complex Layers of Tellings through Time," accessed September 10, 2019, http://www.trebuchet-magazine.com/oe-orpheus-euridice-artpoetrymusic-event/.

[62] Cathy Caruth, Trauma—Explorations in Memory (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151.

[63] Michael A. Holly, "Patterns in the Shadows," In[]Visible Culture—An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies, no. 1 (Winter 1998), accessed July 20, 2019. http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/patterns-in-the-shadows/.

imagination."[64] That it is worn through text, music, film, paintings—it operates as a textual moment always in movement, always searching for a new form. The "skin" that Gaiman speaks of is performed literally here, as de Freston works and re-works textual matter upon his own body. His skin, his flesh, becomes part of the raw material, the nascent text prior to its emergence upon the canvas. More current works have seen de Freston occupy, ever more visibly, himself on the canvas. Not a horsehead or abstraction—but identifiably, him. His home life, his naked form, with the mask falling away, held, or saved, by his lover. The artist emerges from the frame.

Figures 26-28. The artist, present.

As the walls of Goya's house, the House of the Deaf Man, were removed, reclaimed, and rehomed, so too are these texts re-worn, re-homed—through body, lens, frame, and canvas.

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[64] Neil Gaiman, Orpheus Underground (Seriously, BBC Radio 4, 2015), accessed July 20, 2019, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06cw171.

The glimpses that we are permitted to see expose the fluidity of that process. As John Bryant notes, "If we are to know the textual condition, we must get to the versions of a text. . . . But the problem is that generally we have only partial access—often no access—to those versions."[65] Yet here, the "facts of revision, publication, and reception" are unveiled, highlighting the multiplicity and method of the text or, rather, texts.[66] The "fluid text" is "the material evidence of <u>shifting</u> intentions," as the <u>material</u> of the work, is now dispersed and visible to the viewer.[67] Bryant's view of the text in motion mirrors the contortions of de Freston, who twists, contorts, and remakes his prototypical form. The viewer, in these exchanges, is privy to that secret space of sinew, clay, paint, and sweat.

Figures 29-31. New work seeking to fragment and refine the image of self.

Current work alters course from the visible form to violent abstraction—de Freston says that painting is the thing that lets him "cope with the noise of the world . . . there's something

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[65] John Bryant, <u>The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen</u> (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4.

[66] Bryant, 2.

[67] Ibid, 8.

about painting that for at least a little moment, the self disappears completely."[68] The body is a canvas—a perpetual process in a necessary destruction—as each layer cedes to the next, "for you must learn, even you, what we have learned, / that some things are marked by their nature not to be completed / but only longed for and sought for a while and abandoned."[69] His easel allows Picasso and Goya to become temporary companions, elsewhere, a Minotaur leads us through hades and concentration camps, while Orpheus comes adrift upon the tide of his own self-absorption, nursing an unhealable, selfish wound. The self here is screaming, fragmented, ripped apart—a piece in the frame of a wider, evolving body of work.

> The painter looks to inject life into paint, for painting is alchemy. Paint can hold light, the spark that [animates] the dead matter. Yet it also speaks of death. It records time, from the personal to the geological. A canvas is a stretched skin, the painting a body, the finished thing a result and record of trauma. It is a site of suffering of paint as flesh and flesh as meat. Painting is physical, erotic and biological. It is a life.[70]

Bio

Dr. Stephen C. Kenyon-Owen is a Lecturer in the Humanities at Glyndwr University in the U.K. His research is interdisciplinary, and focuses on textual transformation across media. This piece is intended as a beginning, or fragment, of a larger work in-progress.

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[68] Tom de Freston, "Landing Page," accessed July 20, 2019. https://vimeo.com/335833837?utm_source=email&utm_medium=vimeo-cliptranscode-201504&utm_campaign=29220.

[69] Tennessee Williams, "Orpheus Descending," in The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams, ed. David Roessel and Nicholas Moschovakis (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007), 14-16, 15. (ln. 32-34).

[70] de Freston, Wreck (2017), 14.