Making the Invisible, Visible: Traumatic Flashbacks and the Haunting of Paul Nash

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Abstract: This paper explores visual strategies employed by artist Dave McKean throughout his graphic novel 'Black Dog: The Dreams of Paul Nash' in which he depicted visual representations of war trauma as experienced by official world- war one artist Paul Nash. Discussion of the nature of trauma and difficulties that the traumatised have in articulating their experiences are considered and strategies used by film makers to communicate the concept of 'the flashback 'are explored within the narrative sequences of McKean's astonishing visual response to his extensive research of Nash's personal experiences of war. Questions are also asked about the ethics of visually representing trauma whilst avoiding sensationalising the theme.

Keywords: Dave McKean, Paul Nash, PTSD, trauma, sequence, graphic novel, First World War, narrative, trauma vortex, illustration, Bessel Van Der Kolk, Peter Levine, film theory, Cathy Caruth.

Introduction:

> 'In 2015, the English artist Dave McKean received a joint commission from the 14-18 Now Foundation, as part of a five-year programme of works that were to mark the centenary of the First World War, in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum, the Lakes International Comic Art Festival and the French association On a Marché sur la Bulle. In the context of the centenary commemorations, he was to "illuminate, in a new way, the experiences and impact of the First World War" [1]

In his powerful Graphic Novel *Black Dog, The Dreams of Paul Nash,* Dave McKean grapples with the challenging task of visualizing war artist Nash's traumatic experiences during the First World War. He does so by creating surreal, fragmentary dream sequences which attempt to bring to greater consciousness, that which Nash had alluded to in his autobiography, but which was missing from paintings created during his time as an official war artist in locations including Passchendaele. As Cathy Caruth has suggested, trauma is very often inaccessible to the conscious mind but can return to the recipient, in time, as fragmentary pieces which are experienced through a variety of modalities such as dream material, somatic sensations and certain behaviours that align with Freud's theory of 'repetition compulsion '.

> "Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, is a wound inflicted not on the body but upon the mind …experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor …so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past, but rather in the way that it's unassimilated nature ..returns to haunt the survivor later on "[2]

Through analysis of McKean's response to and interpretation of Nash's war time experiences, (which he garnered through extensive research including Nash's autobiography 'Outline') I aim to explore visual strategies which McKean utilized to aid with the reader's understanding of trauma. Nash's landscape painting, the Menin Road will also be analysed, in order to shed light on ways in which trauma might be experienced by the traumatised.

> 'We have seen that mental images return to haunt the narrator. Their resurgence affects Nash's impressionable mind, and this is translated by what could be termed McKean's spectral paradigm, a mode already explored in previous works such as *Signal to Noise* (Gaiman and McKean 1992),' [3]

McKean's graphic novel follows a tradition of the genre as a means to communicate challenging subject- matter relating to war and the trauma experienced in response to that. Visual commentary concerning the political, social and cultural impacts of war have been published as graphic novels throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. From well-known narratives including Art Spiegleman's 'Maus', a powerful visual response to the Jewish Holocaust, to Marjane Satrapi's 'Persepolis' in which Satrapi sequentially represents an Iranian generation traumatized by the Iran/Iraq war, and her personal growth during and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the form has been used as a tool to disseminate knowledge to audiences transcending time and culture. 'War Brothers. The Graphic Novel' is an adaptation of Sharon E. McKay's young adult narrative, illustrated by Canadian Artist Daniel La France, in which the experiences of a young child soldier, Jacob are recounted, and the reader is introduced to the devastating effects of PTSD upon the child. This 'psychic injury' subsequently becomes a lens through which the boy recounts his story.

This paper acknowledges contributions within the important genre of graphic novels /comics and explorations of war and trauma, but will focus upon an analysis of Dave McKean's interpretation of Paul Nash's experiences of war and his subsequent psychiatric injury in response to those.

Comics studies shares some common ground with both film and literature studies and is a growing area in the field of contemporary research. Within a continuing discourse related to the field, this contribution seeks to deepen my understanding of strategies used by artists to visually communicate the reverberating effects of trauma, and how the form of sequential narrative has historically been and continues to be, a powerful tool through which to explore traumatic narratives.

Menin Road

McKean references Nash's famous painting *The Menin Road* for the front cover of his graphic novel in which the 'black dog 'of the artist's dreams is situated aloft a burnt -out tree stump boldly set against a cloud of yellow -grey fog, a reference to the devastating weaponization of mustard gas which was employed to inflict horrific wounds during World War 1. Washes of paint are layered up almost obliterating the dark, charred trees underneath. The dog, which appears as a striking motif throughout the Graphic Novel, is a symbol and composite of the animal and Nash himself. The impact of war and his exposure to the Surrealist movement during this time, forever changed Nash's representations of landscapes – burnt out stumps of trees and muddy trenches replacing the gentle, pastoral scenes he was previously known for.

In *The Menin Road* Nash created a visual representation depicting the aftermath of violent and murderous undertakings in which the traumatic events are hidden from view and contained, lying dormant and embedded within a landscape in which the burnt and charred remains of trees are symbolic of dead soldiers lost to the war. Nash's desolate landscape depicts large, rain filled craters in which the iridescent colours of petrol seep from upturned vehicles, into water – filled craters brutally formed by bombs. There are no bodies in the famous painting and as art historian Andrew Graham -Dixon points out in the BBC documentary 'British Art in War' the use of weapons employed during this war obliterated human bodies and animal carcasses to the extent that there were often no visible traces left behind.

In response to researching a range of sources documenting Nash's experiences of war, McKean visualized hallucinatory images in which he interprets the artists' traumatic experiences, which appear most often as dream material in which he creates surreal, fragmented sequences which break through into and disrupt the narrative, in a sense mirroring the disturbing quality of repressed traumatic memories rupturing the consciousness of the traumatised. In such sequences McKean perhaps represents experiences too harrowing for Nash to hold in his conscious mind.

Nash's intimate relationship with landscapes prior to wartime, in which he created forms that seemingly alluded to a welcoming living, organic entity, was eventually replaced by devastated landscapes. He was taught to read trench maps during the war and was intimately connected with the terrain in which he lived and worked during this time.

> 'On trench maps, the words 'copse', 'wood', even 'forest' soon became irrelevant as trees were felled by artillery, reduced to splinters and charred by fire. So system-atic was the destruction and so ruthless the cutting it was estimated that it would take half a century for many areas to be able to produce decent timber again. Indeed, French horticulturalists coined the term 'forest trauma' [4]

The devastated landscapes reverberated with the trauma of the men who fought there as clods of mud blended with tissue from the dead and wounded. The charred trees that appear in Nash's paintings and which are referenced by McKean in 'Black Dog are symbolic of the men who were maimed or dead: '

> 'Nash saw all this. In the Ypres Salient he was aghast at the sight of splin-tered copses and dismembered trees, seeing in their shattered limbs an equiv-alent for the human carnage that lay all around or even hung in shreds from the eviscerated treetops. In so many of his war pictures, the trees remain inert and gaunt, failing to respond to the shafts of sunlight; their branches dangle lifelessly 'like melancholy tresses of hair' [5].

McKean constructs sequences which are, at times, non - linear, and in which intrusive memories erupt and dismantle the narrative chronology. The repetition of certain themes, such as the black dog of the title (an allusion to depression or melancholy) which reappears throughout, at times as a guide leading him through deadly terrain whilst at others chasing Nash and at one point in the narrative the black dog, lying on a hospital bed appears to have subsumed Nash, as he lies in a coma after suffering a breakdown. Contemporary psychologist Peter Levine in his analyses of psychological injury, has alluded to what he named the *Trauma Vortex*, a physiological and psychological magnetic force that pulls the traumatised back in time to re -experience moments of terror. He and others working within the field refer to trauma as being '*embodied*', unassimilated and still active in the central nervous system.

The first hospitalization

In 1917, Nash was transferred from the war to Gosport Military hospital as a result of contracting measles. Within the context of a visually striking double page spread, McKean depicts a feverish Nash in bed where past and present memories collide and soldiers in battle, canon fire and corpses of horses surround him, the mud hued landscape merging with the bedsheets as he fitfully sleeps, explosions scattered around the murky landscape and also appear to erupt from within his mind, as if neurons are firing. The intrusions of traumatic flashback states can become activated both within the context of dreams or whilst awake, and McKean skilfully uses visual strategies which allude to both states of being. The shifting plates of the conscious and unconscious converge as a doctor describes the harrowing wartime situation that Nash has been removed from and that he will once again be confronted with when he is well enough to return to the front.

Fig 1: McKean, D Black Dog

The form of the graphic novel has been described as the bridge between film and illustration in which artists make use of strategies seen in film, for example cropping, and panning in and out of a composition. Certain film theorists suggest that depictions of 'the flashback 'in film was used as a vehicle to convey disrupted memory. McKean's own approach to creating flashback sequences appears in the form of surrealistic images in which burnt out tree stumps, cannons, crashed planes, animals (possibly a reference to Guernica?) and soldiers appear to simultaneously play out in the foreground of the bed as Nash feverishly sleeps. McKean's depiction of the flashback blurs the boundaries between both past and present and creates a seamless visual representation in which there is no separation. The monochromatic umbers of McKean's palette evoke the muddy battlefields and trenches of the war, whilst also alluding to the palettes of Nash's war paintings.

The second hospitalization

At another point during 1917 Nash was taken to the Swedish Hospital in London after falling and breaking a rib whilst in action in Paschendale. McKean depicts Nash in his hospital bed, alluding to what is now commonly termed *'Survivor's guilt'* as the artist recalls '*the mad nightmare of Paschendale*' where, within his nightmare filled sleep, he hears the sounds of his fellow soldiers [6]. In her analysis of the paintings of Paul Nash Emma Chambers suggests that during this time,

> 'Nash was beginning to show signs of' shell shock' now known as PTSD, in a letter to his wife Margaret, he wrote that the situation was 'unspeakable, Godless, hopeless…. I am no longer an artist interested and curious.. may it burn their lousy souls' [7]. During this time the images he created were barren and devoid of life.'

Nash tried to make sense of the senselessness of war and of the destructiveness of humans and nature. In a series of panels in which McKean represents him as though walking through an internal landscape, behind his own retinas, dwarfed by complex networks of arterial caverns studded with thorns, that in turn become tangled branches in a dense landscape, he finds a bird which leads him to a nest of blue eggs, whereby he philosophises about the paradox of war and nature he asks,

> 'How can this delicate perfection exist in the same world as a 140-ton Howitzer firing 1,000 kg shells that propel hot metal shrapnel into soft human tissue, into minds protected by perfectly proportional, frangible shells?' [8].

Fig 2: McKean, D Black Dog

Within these panels, McKean's hallucinatory images visually resonate with contemporary theories of trauma. In the case of the arterial sequences, after several pages of a wordless, chronological narrative, this segues into a visually disrupted conclusion as panels collapse into less structured images in which networks of arteries which appear to suggest visual portals or moments in time through which Nash's hand stretches and grasps further, seemingly coming closer to his reader, attempting to touch the blue eggs. Shifts in the scale of the hand from left to right of the spread increase as it first touches and then holds one of the eggs between finger and thumb. He speaks of the fragility of human minds and flesh, the eggs symbolizing them. In reversed text to the bottom right of the page, Nash asks:

'Where is the insanity? In the war? In nature? In the place in my mind where these two things touch?' [9]

Trying to process the madness he was experiencing on the battlefield and the simultaneous devastation of nature he tries to articulate his confusion:

> 'the most broken trees even had sprouted somewhere and, in the midst, from the depth of the wood's bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale. Ridiculous mad incongruity! One can't think which is the more absurd, the War or Nature) Nash was both bemused and maddened by the strange absurdities all around him, unsure whether to aim his eloquent anger at the war, at nature or at both' [10].

The third hospitalization

'Shell shock', a term widely used during war time, was reframed as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress) in the late 1980s and recognised as a real psychiatric injury or wounding of the psyche rather than the sign of malingering or cowardice as was attributed to soldiers traumatised during wartime.

During the first World War, those soldiers suffering from what was commonly known as 'Shell Shock' were sent to recuperate in hospitals close to the battlefields. They were often stigmatised as weak willed, seen as 'malingerers' and offered a range of procedures to cure them, including the administering of electric currents to parts of their bodies. Hypnosis, abreaction and rigorous exercise were also recommended as the cure for their illness. Psychiatrists were expected to get the wounded well enough to return to the battlefield.

> 'Military psychiatry in the UK is generally regarded as having begun in World War One and, indeed the recognition of psychiatric illness in general' [11]

In 1921, following a catastrophic breakdown, Nash was once again hospitalized, in the *Queen Square Hospital for Nervous Diseases* in London. At this time, it was thought that he may not regain consciousness. In McKean's depictions of this period, through a series of panels reminiscent of analogue film with sprocket holes, he confronts his reader with panels depicting a cold and impersonal hospital room, in which Nash lies in a catatonic state, appearing to be unreachable. At times, it is he depicted lying comatose on the bed and at others he is replaced by the black dog, after which a whole page is devoted to a representation of what might be an operating theatre , followed by a dramatic and disturbing sequence of twelve panels, in which Nash been fully subsumed inside of the dog and struggles to fight his way out from the belly of the beast through its jaws, as if Jonah emerging from the Whale. He asks,

> 'Am I sloughing off the black dog or is he expelling me?' [12].

In another panel, we see Nash's eyes peering out through the dogs' eye sockets. McKean's representation of the dog is often ambiguous, sometimes it bears Nash's face, at others it becomes a hybrid doctor and at times Nash is incarcerated within the animal.

Perhaps this sequence could also be interpreted as a harrowing metaphor for rebirth in which McKean depicts Nash struggling to prise open the dog's jaws, seemingly letting out a silent scream or perhaps drawing his first breath as he gains consciousness, a violent emergence from his former retreat from the perilous world into a catatonic state. Following the violence of the previous sequence and free of the black dog, Nash is drawn to a keyhole from which a whisp of yellow- green tendrils or perhaps the scent of nature appears, travelling from beyond the confines of the dark hospital room, this being the first appearance of colour in the otherwise almost monochromatic pages preceding: the colour is reminiscent of spring. On opening the door of the room, he is met by a vibrant, lime green wood, a metaphor for new life for his emergence from a former soul death.

The Trauma Vortex

McKean's strategy of creating wordless visual sequences throughout Black Dog, which are chronologically disrupted, demonstrates his creative response to the challenge of both visually representing trauma and his understanding of problems associated with memory and trauma. He creates a visual strategy through which he alters the sequence that alludes to the disruptions to both language and memory which can be lost in the wake of traumatic experiences. The traumatized person's ability to recall memories associated with particular events is severely compromised and symptoms can present as the lack of a cohesive chronological narrative, which is replaced by gaps and silences, holes in the memory, fragments of imagery and waking hallucinations. Cathy Caruth, an important scholar in the field of Trauma proposes that,

> 'What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way its violence has not been fully known.' [13]

McKean reconnects his audience both with the harrowing events that Nash witnessed and that which Caruth suggests has not been '*fully known'* and therefore has previously been unprocessed. In a particularly potent spread, prior to Nash's final hospitalization, the artist visualizes a scenario which may be interpreted as a physical explosion expelling matter outwards, a depiction of a hole, a void, a shattering of matter. A talking skull on the right hand of the spread, suggests that unlike those soldiers confronted with violent explosions externally, Nash experienced them internally, within his mind and this would seemingly also allude to his shattered mind.

> 'I leave little pieces of myself, scattered about the place '[14].

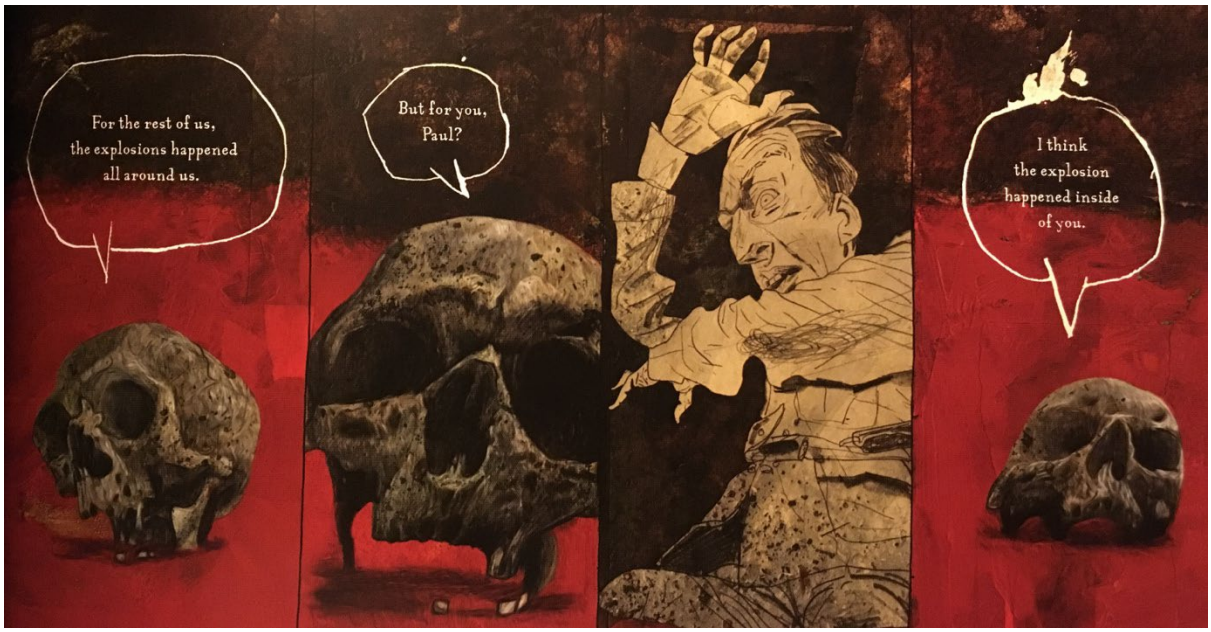

Fig 3: McKean, D. Black Dog

Conclusion

Ruth Leys, a noted historian of trauma writes,

> 'The flashback implies the cinematic possibility of literally reproducing or cutting back to a scene from the past and hence expresses the idea that the trauma victim's experiences are exact "reruns" or "replays"of the traumatic incident '…'as such it is beloved of film directors especially those portraying war….we suggest, but of course can never prove, that the cinema and video technology have exercised an important influence on the organization of memory by providing new templates for *expressing* distress [15].

In light of Ley's proposition, I deduce that within the context of *Black Dog* , a bridge between illustration and film, the flashback is represented visually through the panelling as a repetitive replay , not an exact visual representation of an original traumatic event (complete 'cinematic' memories are often missing in sufferers of PTSD) but representations of past events which appear to erupt into the narrative, intrude upon its chronology and play out again in the present .

Roger Luckhurst, in an analysis of PTSD and its relationship to film writes:

> 'This is not to say that film simply signposts developments of that concept. Luckhurst points to something more dialogic. Given that definitions of PTSD (in the DSM) did not include as symptoms the experience of the flashback or intrusive images until 1987, cinematic history demonstrated this aspect of the disorder long before psychiatry' [16].

Unlike film, within the context of the graphic novel, images and sequences are static, however artists such as McKean employ similar techniques such as the flashback, to communicate events from the past which disrupt the present chronology.

Post memory is a term used by theorist Marianne Hirsch to describe how traumatic experiences can be communicated to younger generations through writing, painting and film amongst other mediums.

> 'The filmic flashback is tentatively traced back to a 20s European Avant Garde and I further outline how this new film form responds to the traumatic impact of the first world war [17].

The lack of a cohesive narrative experienced by those following traumatic events, in which language and images are lost, is effectively alluded to in one of Nash's paintings titled '*The Void*'. Luckhurst claims that

> '…the only ethically appropriate form of representation is not the documentary, the archival or its reconstruction, but instead, the presentation of absence, the voiding of reference, the anti-representational.' [18]

In Nash's wartime landscapes, the representation of hard evidence is missing from action. In this sense, they may be seen as holding up a mirror to the traumatised mind. The depiction of a consistent visual narrative in which representations of evidence might be documented, is lost.

> 'The image reveals that representations of trauma cannot constitute evidence; it documents precisely the abolition of referential system on which the notion of evidence depends' (Baer, Citations 2002: 117). Any referential art of trauma Baer consequently dismisses as trivial forms of the 'mass-produced sublime' (77).[19]

Saltsman and Rosenberg allude to the visual arts by suggesting that

> 'if trauma could have a proper visual form, it might be invisible. That is, "a successful" (authentic, honest) rendering of trauma entails the failure of representation.' [20].

War Paintings produced by Nash correlate with such theories, as bearing witness to these horrific wartime events, his choice to paint traumatic landscapes in the aftermath of war that do not visually represent the shattered bodies speaks to that which is unspoken, unreachable and unknowable. McKean too, although including depictions of soldiers, wounded or dead animals and broken planes, takes a surrealist approach whilst avoiding direct representations of mutilation and gore. Instead, the use of colour and media such as the oozing red present in some of his images is used to evoke a sense of the visceral rather than fully confronting his reader with macerated bodies. His indirect surrealistic approach, whereby he makes the invisible visible, and through his use of metaphor (such as the black dog) tackles the problematic task of visual representations of traumatic events. His visualisations and representations in *Black Dog* allude to what Freud refers to as the '*return of the repressed* '.

Contemporary trauma theories by those including Bessel Van der Kolk, describe disrupted memory, and today MRI scans are able to visually capture the ways in which trauma impacts specific parts of the brain and memory, causing those with trauma to dissociate from disturbing memories and instead, experience physiological sensations such as anxiety and fear within their bodies and in particular, within the central nervous system.

> 'In trauma story is lost. Marooned episodic events express themselves in fugue states as 'unconscious fixed ideas. Dissociation is a defence against overwhelming experience. Intense emotional experiences disrupt the integration of perceptual and thinking processes. Memories of overwhelming events are stored as inaccessible fragments.' [21]

The use of various visual strategies, such as shifts of colour and style throughout McKean's process resonate with such theories, as intrusive images and bodily sensations erupt into consciousness, dismantling any attempt at a cohesive narrative. Although visual narratives cannot accurately represent traumatic events, through the use of imagination and research perhaps they can bring some kind of understanding to audiences. Caruth points out that although survivors of events such as war, carry an *'impossible'* history within them, such experiences might be witnessed and understood to an extent by those who are exposed to creative work produced in response to these. Nossery and Hubbel tackle the problematic task of visually representing trauma, questioning how artists might respond to such challenging subject matter without sensationalizing it. With reference to Black Dog, McKean bypasses such challenges by underpinning his work with extensive research into Nash, by referencing his autobiography and through analysis of his paintings. McKean's adopts a surrealistic approach and represents trauma as emerging through dreams and disrupted consciousness. The expressionistic, surrealistic approach taken successfully bypasses the more horrific and sensationalist aspects of war and its effects and instead attempts to visualize the psychological impact of trauma.

Through the adoption of stylistic and technical approaches, the reverberating trauma which disrupts the chronology of the narrative and in particular, the visual representations of mental and physiological trauma that Nash experienced, McKean attempts to provide his reader with a visual map to understanding how PTSD affects the sufferer. The recurring theme of the black dog, the fractured sequences and nightmares, disruptions of consciousness and other repetitions of themes, seek to articulate how trauma cannot be fully known, but only alluded to.

> 'Trauma cannot simply be erased, just as it cannot be properly remembered; however, with the help of art, it can be made into a culturally useful discourse, something that is indispensable for the restoration of what the disaster shattered into an inoperative community.' [22]

Benyai and Stara propose that art can be beneficial and a conduit for opening up a dialogue around trauma. Audiences who have become desensitized by television footage of war, may discover through the visual language of McKean's graphic novel, a medium that introduces them to new ways of thinking about war trauma. Those who may resist engaging with such events through traditional history books might find graphic novel formats more accessible. As a tool for learning, McKean's graphic novel might play an important role in educating new and younger audiences. To conclude I would like to propose that Mc Kean has created a body of work which provides nuanced terrains of visual information that Nash decided he could or would not represent. McKean has, instead, visualised inner landscapes representative of trauma and created imaginary landscapes as metaphors for the mind, excavating that which has formerly been buried. McKean writes,

'All the things that happen in the book are real things that happened in Nash's life but filtered through my imagination. Much in the same way that he looked at the landscape and turned trees to bone and the ground to tortured flesh – you see something real transforming under his Brush. I thought I could do something similar with his life. Dreams are a form of reimagining – you put different events and emotions together and out of it, another way of looking at the world emerges'. [23]

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