

## ***The Ninth Life of Louis Drax: from text to film***

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"In any metamorphosis, it's what's different that matters. A replica is a tame and hobbled thing. But a transformation has wings".<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1: The film poster  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_9th\\_Life\\_of\\_Louis\\_Drax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_9th_Life_of_Louis_Drax)

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<sup>1</sup> Jensen, "Seeing *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* on Screen", *The Guardian*, 2nd September 2016.

## Jensen's fifth novel

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Liz Jensen is a successful British-Danish contemporary writer, whose work has been translated into twenty languages. She is the author of eight novels, published between 1995 and 2012, of which *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* (2004) is the fifth. These novels range through a variety of subjects and styles, from the neo-Victorian to time travel, but all come under the umbrella of "literary fiction". A small school of "Jensen studies" has emerged in recent years, and while she is most often cited for her clifi (climate-change fiction), which includes two rewritings of the Noah myth, *Ark Baby* (1998) and *The Rapture* (2009), along with *The Uninvited* (2012), a speculative and dystopian tale, the detective thriller is also a distinct subset of her output. It is into this category that *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* falls, along with *War Crimes for the Home*, published two years previously. Using the lens of adaptation studies, this article will examine the relationship of Alexander Aja's 2016 adaptation of *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* to Jensen's novel.<sup>2</sup> However, it is first necessary to give an overview of the characters and plot of Jensen's novel, and to comment briefly on some of the narrative devices it employs, certain of which are to some degree discernible in the film.

If *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* can be considered a detective thriller, its affiliation to this genre is not simple: the novel is a twist on the detective story, and is highly metafictional. To summarize the main arc of the story, at the outset, the eponymous Louis, aged ten, lies in a coma ward, between life and death after an "accident" caused by his mother's Munchausen's by proxy (she is driven to harm her own child, whom others believe to be simply accident-prone – a brush with cot-death, a fall onto electrified metro tracks, salmonella and botulism are among the misfortunes which befall him in the first ten years of his life).<sup>3</sup> The novel spans the time in which Louis is living an inner life, at some hidden level of consciousness, until the moment comes when he is able to accept the death of his (step)father, and so "come back to life". While Louis works towards this point, a complementary story arc unravels his past: living in Lyon with his mother, Natalie, and with the often-absent Pierre, whom he believes to be his father, Louis becomes gradually aware that something is being kept from him regarding the circumstances of his birth. It is the truth about how Louis came into being that provides the crux of the plot, that final revelation which is crucial to the thriller form, and Louis's mission – of which he is only patchily conscious, even prior to falling into a coma – is to make sense of his back story. This is the *sine qua non* for continuing to live, since Louis has great difficulty ensuring his own survival in the face of his mother's desire to harm him, a well-concealed impulse which will prove an important motor to the thriller plot. It is not until his "ninth life" that Louis manages to loosen the hold that Natalie has on him. Only in his comatose state will he finally be able to escape Natalie, when he learns to "switch her off" in a way he could not in real life, as if she were the one in a "post-human" state of advanced life support, rather than he.

Louis himself is the narrator of the events leading up to his accident, while his hospital consultant, Dr Dannachet, takes over from that time on, although parts of Louis's narratives are retrospective, so that the two voices alternate. Nonetheless, Dr Dannachet narrates the greater part of

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<sup>2</sup> The film rights were sold before the publication of the novel, but the death of Anthony Minghella delayed the release of the film by some years. See Liz Jensen, "Seeing *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* on screen is like meeting an eerie stranger", op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Liz Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004, pp. 1-2.

the novel. Like Louis, he narrates in the first person, his measured, educated tone contrasting with Louis's childish, breathless and sparingly punctuated febrility. Significantly, it is the sensible and educated Dr Dannachet who lays the groundwork for the central part of the plot, in which Louis, using the doctor as his medium, manages to communicate telepathically from the depths of his vegetative state.

The plot turns on the revision of the accepted version of Louis's birth and near-death at the age of ten. For the greater part of the novel, the story of Louis' latest accident, as told by Natalie, holds: during a family picnic on Louis's tenth birthday, an argument broke out about a packet of sweets, and Louis's step-father Pierre, in a moment of intense anger, pushed Louis over the edge of a ravine, before going on the run:

Louis had sweets in his pocket. Pierre saw him eating one. He got furious. He didn't like Louis eating sweets. He said I wasn't bringing him up properly. [...] He went on and on. He was accusing me of all sorts of things. Being a bad mother. Louis couldn't stand it, and he ran off towards the ravine. We both ran after him. Pierre got to him first. He's very strong. He grabbed Louis and started dragging him to the car, saying he was taking him to Paris. Louis managed to get free and run off. But Pierre caught up with him again just by the ravine, and they struggled.<sup>4</sup>

This version of events is finally revised into something much more complicated and less expected: the sweets were not in fact sweets but contraceptive pills; Louis was taking them in order to avoid growing up into a rapist, which Natalie, it turns out falsely, has always claimed his biological father, Jean-Luc, was, and which has come to Louis's ears; Pierre, at some point during the picnic, discovered this, and an argument did indeed take place, perilously close to the edge of a ravine.<sup>5</sup> However, it finally proves, it was Natalie who pushed Pierre over the edge (literally as well as figuratively), and, following this, Louis went over all by himself – his final act in his Munchausen's-dominated relationship with his mother was to inflict an accident on himself, in order to please her. As the end of the novel approaches, Louis recalls his own fall thus:

I did what she wanted, like I always do. She didn't even need to help me, not this time. [...] I walked backwards. I counted the steps. It was five steps. It was easy. One two three four five. And then I thought there might be a six but there wasn't a six. Instead of a six, I fell into the water, and died.<sup>6</sup>

The "mystery" which *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* unravels is finally one of family relations, rather than of crime as such: the "family romance", in the Freudian sense, is the very meat of the plot, and the intimately domestic is reconciled with the detective thriller form in order that history may be rewritten. Within this narrative frame, Louis functions both as the object of a mystery, being investigated by others – as a psychoanalytical case study for his therapist, Marcel "Fat" Perez, and a medical case for Dr. Dannachet, the consultant who runs the coma ward where he is treated – and as a boy detective, trying to make sense of the story he sees enacted by his parents. However, rather than having Famous-

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<sup>4</sup> Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> Louis's origins are different in the novel and the film: in the novel, he believes to be the natural son of a rapist, Jean-Luc, and fears turning into a rapist himself. The film does not dwell on this preoccupation of Louis's, although Natalie still claims – falsely, as in the novel – to have conceived her son through rape, and Louis does at one stage claim that men "did bad things to my mum" (Alexandre Aja, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, Anticolony Films, Brightlight Pictures, Canada/United Kingdom, 2016, 37'10).

<sup>6</sup> Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, op.cit, p. 206.

Five style adventures, he remains tied to his mother's apron strings. While conscious, his investigations centre entirely on the inner workings of the family, with no outside activity, so that his role is less boy-adventurer than spy, and following the accident, Louis's "detective work" takes place entirely within his own head.

In the time leading up to the accident, Louis is as yet unable to formulate his story verbally, and imposes on himself a "secret rule", known as "Don't say anything".<sup>7</sup> While he takes pleasure in provoking Perez, with whom he experiences a turbulent transference, he is not ready to take the consequences of telling the truth. Louis's own interpretation of events is threatened by the greater age and experience of Perez, who, as an analytical psychologist, functions as a much more competent rival detective, as it were a "professional reader" of conflicting discourses. As such, he might at any minute break through Louis's defences and discover the truth – and thus put an end to the mother-son relationship, which, though abusive and unhealthy, provides both Louis and Natalie with the affective nourishment upon which they rely.

While its primary role is to obfuscate the truth of his own experience, Louis's narrative nonetheless draws a precise, and unflattering, portrait of Natalie. While he "does not know what he is saying", he reveals a great deal about her self-help, her conflicts, and her habit of inappropriately confiding in her son. For example, he observes, "Maman's friends keep changing. They keep changing because one day they have a Major Disagreement and the Major Disagreement is always about me", and, again clearly parroting Natalie, "Mothers need air and space and freedom. They're like birds, if you keep them in a cage they go mad. It isn't just dads that need to fly", the reference being to Pierre's job as an airline pilot.<sup>8</sup> Louis is fully conversant with his mother's "Emotional Work",<sup>9</sup> and with the fact that, at least according to Natalie's version of events, many people have "let her down very badly".<sup>10</sup> It is through Louis's repetition of his mother's words that the reader builds a picture of a woman who is ambivalent about motherhood, has difficulty keeping friends, and complains about her responsibilities: "Visiting Fat Perez was Papa's idea, but it was Maman's headache because she was the one who had to take me there".<sup>11</sup> It also appears that Natalie likes to cultivate her son's sense of guilt: "Boys shouldn't make their mamans cry. And if their mamans do cry, boys should be there to comfort them and say I'm sorry things went wrong, Maman, I'm sorry your heart's in your mouth the whole time".<sup>12</sup> Louis is a detective of the unconscious, but he is by no means master of what he is detecting, since he has no effective means of decoding it. He can only provide a lens through which the reader may decode the truth. Moreover, he is aware that he is considered "disturbed", and plays up to this image, chiefly by frequent lying, and by various episodes of acting-out. However, his narrative also constitutes the locus of truth in the novel, which the other characters – as well as the reader – must learn how to read.

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### **Translation, adaptation**

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This is, then, a highly metafictional novel, which sets up conflicting narratives which are ironically juxtaposed, and must be decoded by the reader in different ways. To this extent, to use the term

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. .5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

coined by Merivale and Sweeney, this novel can be considered a “metaphysical” detective story (Merivale, 1). But what questions arise when such a narrative is adapted for the cinema?

*The film version of The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, directed by Alexandre Aja, was released in 2016, and its reception was somewhat mitigated.<sup>2</sup> Although a *Guardian* review did concede, “[I]t is watchable and even intriguing in its weird way”,<sup>13</sup> the following criticism from the *New York Times*, which takes issue with the uneven tone, was (regrettably, for Jensen fans) more typical:

It's not clear whether *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* is deliberately inconsistent or merely an example of confused filmmaking. [...] The film [...] sometimes sounds like a children's fantasy [...] At other times, it feels like a supernatural thriller [...] When the movie finally settles on a tone, it's not quite any of those, and it's too late.<sup>14</sup>

However, while the film was regarded as not entirely successful, it can be interestingly approached from the perspective of adaptation studies.

It has long been established that the original novel cannot be considered as “the reference by which the film should be criticised”,<sup>15</sup> as was the case in the early days of film studies, when criticism was dominated by fears of “infidelity” to the original, and the very process of adaptation was considered compromising and reductive. Thomas Leitch warns against seeing an adaptation in terms of “fidelity”,<sup>16</sup> Robert Stam against emitting “moral” judgments about such fidelity or infidelity.<sup>17</sup> Some prominent film theorists have always rejected this kind of analysis: George Bluestone warned sixty years ago that comparing a film and a novel as “better” or “worse” than one another is as fruitless as “pronounc[ing] Wright Johnson's Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikowsky's Swan Lake” given that each is characterised by “unique and specific properties” (5-6). Since that time, a vast body of adaptation theory has grown up, much of which posits similar arguments to those outlined above. Such questions are a part of what Linda Hutcheon refers to as the inevitable “haunting” of a film adaptation by the original text.<sup>18</sup> Insisting that the adaptation is not “derivative”, but is “its own palimpsestic thing”, she holds that an adaptation can be regarded as a form of intertextuality, and “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work”.<sup>19</sup> Thus this article seeks at the same time to avoid taking Liz Jensen's novel as the sole criterion against which Alexandre Aja's adaptation is to be judged, rejecting any notion of a film adaptation as “inferior and secondary”,<sup>20</sup> and to compare the two artefacts where this is useful. Aja's film will be analysed as an adaptation, as a visual reconstruction of a narrative, within the theoretical framework this implies.

In order to anchor this analysis among my main critical preoccupations, I have adopted an approach which includes translation and intertextuality as metaphors for adaptation. This article thus aims to show how Aja's adaptation of Jensen's novel navigates between “transposition” of, and

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Bradshaw, “*The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* (review): Weirdly Watchable Thriller”, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), 1st September 2017. Accessed 12.11.2021.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Genzlinger, “Review: ‘*The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*.’ So, Little Boys Get Nine Lives, Too?” *The New York Times*, 1st September 2016. Accessed 07.05.2017.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: from Gone with the Wind to The Passion of Christ*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Stam, cit. in Yvonne Griggs, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Adaptation Studies: Adapting the Canon in Film, TV, Novels and Popular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2013, p.6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

“commentary” on, the original, to use Geoffrey Wagner’s terminology,<sup>21</sup> and this with three main objectives in mind: to examine the ways in which the very literary devices present in the novel find corollaries in the visual strategies mobilised by the film version, to establish how certain characteristics of the novel are directly transferred to the film or transformed by it, and to analyse several specific aspects of deconstruction and reconstruction as regards the portrayal of Natalie, Louis’s mother.<sup>6</sup>

Linda Constanzo Cahir argues that adaption can be read as a process of translation, which is very pertinent to this film in particular.<sup>22</sup> According to Cahir, adaptation is a misnomer, and the term “translation” better describes the process by which text is made into film. She argues, “‘To adapt’ means to alter the structure or function of an entity so that it is better fitted to survive and to multiply in its new environment, adding that ‘to adapt is to move *that same entity* into a new environment’; it might, she concedes, undergo “modification”, or even “radical mutation” in order to “*accommodate itself* to its new environment”.<sup>23</sup> However, she sees a film made from a novel as a “translation”, because “to translate”, in contrast to ‘to adapt’, is to move a text from one language to another. It is a *process of language*, not a process of survival and generation”.<sup>24</sup> I have argued in my book on Liz Jensen that the novel on which the film is based seems to be a translation from an absent, French original (the novel is set in France), and that this is one of its most fascinating aspects, since it seems to point to an inaccessibility which is a condition of the text itself:

Natalie’s inaccessibility is confirmed by and reflected in the fact that the novel reads like a translation from the French, and is shot through with French-sounding structures such as “The mother of Louis Drax”, suggestive of the French “La mère de Louis Drax” (*The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* 110), or “You’re not aware?” (“Vous n’êtes pas au courant?”) (29). The fact that there is no original in existence in itself makes an otherworld of the text, distancing it and placing it, like Natalie, in a “beyond”.<sup>25</sup>

If the novel can be read as itself a pseudo-translation, it is interesting to approach the film version as a further translation of the work. One aspect of the film which bears this out is the narrative of the main character, and narrator of a large part of the novel, the eponymous Louis. Aware that he is considered “disturbed”, he plays up to his image, but he also plays “the fool” in the way the phrase is understood in *King Lear*: sometimes what he says is very prescient, and “constitutes the locus of truth in the novel which the other characters – as well as the reader – must learn how to read”.<sup>26</sup> Louis at once colludes with his mother, covering up her attempts to harm him, and reveals what is actually happening. Jensen herself has emphasised the importance of Louis’s voice, claiming that the child “appeared” in 2002, implying that his voice seemed to be fully-formed, without her intervention, and in a further layer, she

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<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Wagner, cit. in Griggs, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Cahir posits different categories of translation – “literal”, which “reproduces the plot and all its attendant details as closely as possible to the letter of the book”; “traditional”, which “maintains the overall traits of the book (its plot, settings, and stylistic conventions) but revamps particular details, and “radical”, which “reshapes the book in extreme and revolutionary ways both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work”, while admitting that the three may overlap (Linda Constanzo Cahir, and James M. Welsh, “The Nature of Film Translation: Literal, Traditional and Radical”, in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*. Jefferson (North Carolina): McFarland, 2006, 13-43, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Cahir, “The Nature of Film Translation”, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Helen E. Mundler, *The Otherworlds of Liz Jensen*, New York: Camden House (Boydell and Brewer), 2016, p. 113.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

claims to have felt, on first meeting Aiden Longworth, the child who plays Louis in the film, "This kid isn't just channelling Louis Drax: he is Louis Drax".<sup>27</sup>

While Louis appears as a non-symbolic, non-verbal object, to his writer, who feels that she "channelled" him when writing the novel, and subsequently that the actor playing the character performs a similar function, it can paradoxically be argued that Louis's voice, particularly when it narrates in voice-over, is "too verbal" for the medium of film, too anchored in the written word. Tasha Robinson complains, in her review, of "Louis's breathless, stream-of-consciousness narration", that bringing the voice to the screen is not effective: "[T]he conceits that work on the page, like Louis's breathless, stream-of-consciousness narration [...] are jarring and mannered on-screen".<sup>28</sup>

The direct deployment of Louis's words from the novel in the film can, however, be seen slightly differently: it can be understood as a self-conscious device, through which the film acknowledges its status as an adaptation of text (here I am dropping Cahir's translation conceit), rather than a fully visual object. George Bluestone, in his founding work on film adaptation, comments that "Because language has laws of its own, and literary characters are inseparable from the language which forms them, the externalisation of such characters often seems dissatisfying",<sup>29</sup> while Fredric Jameson takes the idea of the clash between the what is symbolised on the page and what is seen further. Michael Walsh, in his work on Film Studies, comments on Jameson's ideas thus: "His ontology of film is dominated by the visual, which in turn is conceived of as an aggressive mastering gaze intent on physically possessing its objects", and mentions a "reduction to the body".<sup>30</sup> Considered in this way, Louis's voice can be interpreted as a textual, novelistic technique which deflects the "aggressivity" inherent in Jameson's "mastering gaze", "intent on physically possessing its objects".<sup>31</sup> A refusal of the "reduction to the body" is particularly pertinent here, since it allows an element of the plot – Natalie's constant, masked attempts to kill her son, her wish to reduce *him* to a body, even a corpse, upon which she can inscribe her own neuroses – to be reflected within the construction of the film. The film is able to emphasise the alternance between these two meanings of "body" by emphasising Natalie as sexual object – film can have a different relationship to Natalie as aesthetic object, and can exploit her, as well as just deploying her. The spectator is thus pushed into a relationship with this character which is different from that of the reader.

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### **"Hitchcock blondes" and melodrama**

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The third part of this article analyses three aspects of the portrayal of Natalie, and how her character is reconstructed in the film adaptation. These stem from implicit Hitchcock references, melodrama and horror.

Natalie's version of events is finally exposed as a series of lies and fabrications, but she herself remains the ultimate mystery, and her motivation will never be understood. The novel exploits

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<sup>27</sup> Liz Jensen, "Seeing *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*", op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Tasha Robinson. "The Ninth Life of Louis Drax (review): a cluttered, confused riff on a Guillermo del Toro fantasy". <https://www.theverge.com/2016/9/2/12757786/the-9th-life-of-louis-drax-film-review-book-adaptation>. Accessed 09.01.2022.

<sup>29</sup> George Bluestone, *Novels into Film*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Walsh, "Jameson and 'Global Aesthetics'", in David Bordwell, and Noël Carroll (ed.). *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996 (481-500), pp. 484-85.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

postmodern techniques of narrative instability, notably through the clash of the narrating voices of Louis and his doctor described above, and also through the concealment of Natalie, who is not a narrator, and will never give any one coherent version of events which might have allowed for understanding and closure.

The film draws out and magnifies the melodrama which is part of the polyphonic mix in the novel. I have analysed the character of Natalie, the child-harming mother, in the novel through the critical lens of “anti-heroine and bitch”, this last being elevated almost to female archetype by Sarah Appleton Aguiar in her book on “wicked women” in literature. For Appleton Aguiar, “the bitch” is a “vital woman, empowered with anger, wit, ruthless survival instincts”.<sup>32</sup> Natalie’s instincts are very troublesome, both in the book and the film, since they lead to harming her own child and deceiving those who try to love and help her. However, the film allows Natalie to be seen in a somewhat different light from in the novel: her reconstruction through the medium of the visual allows ironic and polyphonic reference to be made to what Flo Leibowitz terms “women’s films” (while the novel has little to do with “women’s fiction”).<sup>33</sup>

Natalie’s beauty (she is played by Sarah Gadon) contributes to this. Portrayed as fascinating to men in the novel, one critic describes her incarnation in the film as a “Hitchcock-blondie” (distasteful as the classification of women by hair-colour may be).<sup>34</sup> Jeff Saporito notes of Hitchcock, “All of his most renowned films feature a blonde in a pivotal role. These blondes aren’t just picturesque stars at whom Hitch directed our gaze.” He describes them as “the ‘Bond girls’ of Hitchcockian cinema, each radiating with beauty while servicing her own mysterious agenda”, and claims that as well as being “beautiful and eye-catching”, they also “project the qualities of independence, poise, range, determination and, most significant, mystery”.<sup>35</sup>

Natalie’s relationship to this cliché is deconstructed in both novel and film through reference to the genre of melodrama. Flo Leibowitz argues that 19<sup>th</sup>-century melodramatic novels and their film counterparts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “often had as their primary effect getting the audience to feel pity by presenting a one-dimensional character being abused by a villain”.<sup>36</sup> Natalie tries to present herself in precisely such a light, by claiming that her husband was violent towards her and eventually pushed Louis into the ravine. Moreover, Leibowitz argues that another characteristic of melodrama is its “outlandish coincidences”.<sup>37</sup> The various terrible things which “happen” to Louis could indeed be interpreted in such a way, with Natalie – who takes centre-stage as his mother – as the eternal victim. However, ultimately there is a turnaround, and the film becomes a sort of anti-melodrama, with Natalie exposed as not the victim, but the perpetrator. A scene towards the end of the film is given over to a flashback to the various means by which she has harmed Louis, most memorably by injecting sweets with poison, and in this way the film plays with the conceits of melodrama, but turns them around.

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Appleton Aguiar, *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*. Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale and Edwardsville, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> See note 36.

<sup>34</sup> Bradshaw, “The Ninth Life of Louis Drax”, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Saporito. <http://screenprism.com/insights/article/what-does-the-term-hitchcock-blondie-mean/>? Web. Accessed 06.05.2017.

<sup>36</sup> Flo Leibowitz, “Apt Feelings, or Why ‘Women’s Films’ Aren’t Trivial”, in David Bordwell, and Noël Carroll (ed.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996 (219-229), p. 220. Flo Leibowitz is citing John Morreal. Leibowitz reiterates this point later, adding that “in these films sorrow and anxious concern for a woman protagonist is evoked as a means of calling the audience’s attention to her motivations and priorities” (ibid., p. 220).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 221.



While the visual is very effective in creating tension and shock in this respect, the processes of Natalie's thought are nonetheless streamlined, and the ultimate reconstruction of Natalie by Louis comes over as simplistic: just because she is beautiful, he tells the audience, does not mean she is good. This rather diluted version of Natalie's story has an equally diluted ending: she ends up interned in a psychiatric institution, pregnant again, which could be read as pointing to a possibility of rehabilitation and hope for the future, whereas in the novel she is "punished" for her behaviour by death in a fire, in which she first loses her sight.

This leads to one of the most striking images in the film. While the horrific end Natalie meets in the novel, with its *King-Lear* reference, is attenuated in the film, it nonetheless places a certain emphasis on her eyes, and reflects one of Louis's particularly significant statements about his mother in the book: "You can't see what's going on in her eyes. They always look the same, like there's nothing inside them. That's how she hides from you".<sup>38</sup> Natalie also "hides" from the reader, never accounting for herself, never narrating, and that her behaviour and motivations are never fully explained.<sup>39</sup> In the novel, Natalie's eyes are appropriately punished, but the film brings attention to them in a different way. Walsh, applying the ideas of both Debord and Jameson, describes how the visual, while mediating images of the real, can also mask reality, and this is very much the case here.<sup>40</sup>



Fig 2 : Natalie Drax (Sarah Gadon)

[https://www.imdb.com/video/vi299087897?playlistId=tt3991412&ref=tt\\_ov\\_vi](https://www.imdb.com/video/vi299087897?playlistId=tt3991412&ref=tt_ov_vi) , 1'50

While Natalie appears in figure 2 a sort of icon, in true Hitchcock-blond splendour, at which the viewer gazes, in the image of Natalie in sunglasses, we also see what Louis sees – that is, his own reflection in his mother's sunglasses. This functions like the "petit a" of Lacanian psychoanalysis (see the Schéma L, below).<sup>41</sup>

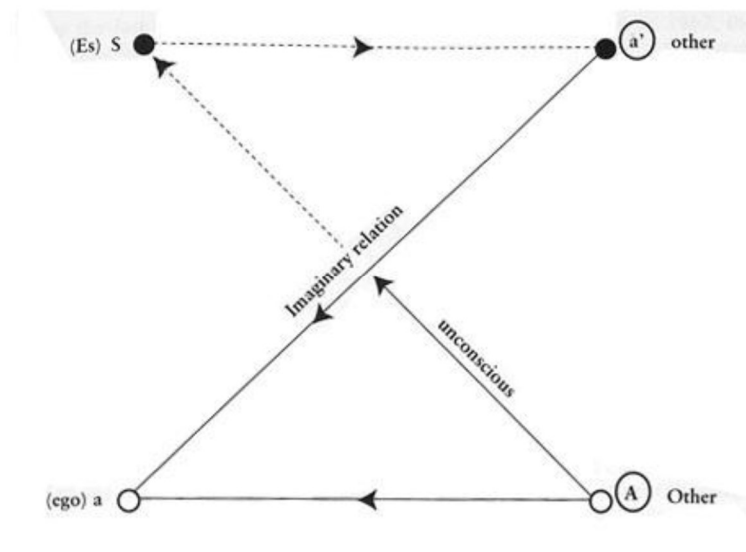
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<sup>38</sup> Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Mundler, op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Walsh, op. cit., p. 484.

<sup>41</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 169.



In searching for a connection between himself as “S” (“sujet”) and his mother as “A” (“grand Autre”), Louis is thwarted: Natalie shuts him – she is a mirror, not a mother – and Louis is alone with nothing but his own reflection to comfort him.

### The Sea, the Sea

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If Louis is to live, he must “construct himself” – a task made difficult by the fact that, in the novel, the relationship between mother and son is described as parasitical and symbiotic, with Louis claiming, “We’re sort of twins, her and me, we need each other, we’d die without each other”.<sup>42</sup> This relationship is reflected in a passage from a book about sea life, which Dr. Dannachet (renamed Dr. Pascal in the film) reads aloud to Louis, and which describes a whale carcass being stripped by parasitical creatures.<sup>43</sup> Arguably, sea imagery becomes as important in the film as it is in the novel, although it is deployed differently.

From the outset, the film stresses sea imagery: it begins with a wide sweep over Land’s End, California (near San Francisco), which is the point where Louis initially falls into the sea, and into his coma (the shot of the Golden Gate Bridge can be read as a visual representation the tenuous thread which connects him to life). The opening credits roll to gently floating jellyfish, accompanied by scribbled illustrations of other sea-creatures. The use of Land’s End for Louis’s fall, rather than a ravine in the countryside near Lyon, as in the novel, also changes things: falling into the sea is not the same as falling into a ravine. Symbolically, the ravine allows an association with “falling down a crack” which underscores the lack of recognition of Louis’s plight by society, including his grandmother, and, for some time, his therapist. Land’s End, however, while it does not have that association, is a satisfactorily extreme signifier, suggesting that Louis is pushed as far as he can go.

Sea imagery is also present in the film in the scene of the father-son trip during which Louis’s father, Peter (played by Aaron Paul), runs into his ex-wife, Catherine, her new husband and children,

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<sup>42</sup> Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Mundler, op. cit., p. 119.

the significance of this being that Peter proves to have left Catherine for Natalie, and to regret it. In the novel, the equivalent outing is to Euro Disney (now Disneyland Paris), which does not tie in particularly with other networks of imagery in the text, but serves simply as a place where a character might be likely to run into an ex-wife with small children. In the film, however, the outing is to Sea World (presumably in San Diego).<sup>44</sup> The advantage of this is that the underlying imagery of the film is harmonised: the viewer is able to make links, for example, between the sea Louis falls into, the huge, threatening creatures which inhabit it, and how the coma can be seen like a deep ocean.<sup>45</sup> This smoothing into one of various networks of imagery from the book – the ravine, and the bonsai trees which, with their largely hidden roots, can be read as a representation of the workings of the brain in coma is presumably for visual effectiveness, in order to have just one repertoire, – in an Iserian sense, for the viewer to draw on.<sup>46</sup> These changes both lay the groundwork for, and account for, the emergence of the sea monster: the imaginary figure from the book – the “scary man”, who lives in a cave in Louis’s mind while he is in his coma, is also given a marine theme.<sup>47</sup>

In the novel, Pierre, Louis’s step-father (Peter in the film) is represented after his death, which occurs when he jumps into the ravine to try to rescue Louis, by a monster which takes the form of a faceless mummy. This creature is known as Gustave, and lives in a cave. Although Gustave seems to have a lot in common with Louis’s step-father, his identity only becomes perfectly clear when he removes his bandages so Louis can see his face, shortly before he dies and leaves forever (he is Gustave for as long as Pierre lies dying in the cave, which takes a few days), and the period before Louis gets to see his face is one of ambiguity as to his identity.

The transmutation of bandaged figure to sea monster is relevant to the portrayal of Natalie. The signifier, “mummy”, can be read as referring back to her, and it can be thus be argued that the figure of Gustave also includes the mother. At best, this can be taken as a reference to the mothering father, who compensates Natalie’s shortcomings. However, the mummy is also an emblem of Natalie’s most salient qualities: her capacity for “hiding”, her inaccessibility, and the extremely disturbing character that emerges when she is stripped of her beauty. The bandages also suggest something broken, and being held together – a further corollary for Natalie. The term “mummy”, already horrifically ambiguous, thus acquires a further layer of polysemy. While this locus of ambiguity is lost in the film version, something new is added: namely, the dimension of horror (the “true calling” of Alexandre Aja, as Wendy Ide points out),<sup>48</sup> who substitutes Hollywoodian kind of horror for another, more verbal, kind, but, in so doing, heightens the commentary made in Liz Jensen’s novel on the hidden horror inherent in family life, when novel and film are compared.

In conclusion, the various adaptation techniques discussed above result in a highly unusual film,

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<sup>44</sup> Given Liz Jensen’s well-documented ecological engagement, the choice of Sea World as a location is perhaps a strange one. The company has been much in the spotlight in recent years for its mistreatment of killer whales. See Rupert Neate, “Sea World to end killer whale shows in wake of mounting protests”, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). 9th November 2015.12.11.2021.

<sup>45</sup> This analogy is more explicit in Jensen’s first novel, where the psychiatrist Dr Stern advises, “See the brain as the uncharted ocean on the globe” (Liz Jensen, *Egg Dancing*, London: Bloomsbury, 1995, p. 207). Ocean imagery is important throughout Jensen’s work (see Mundler 76-83, op. cit.).

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Iser defines the repertoire as “all the familiar territory within the text,” adding, “This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged” (Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 69).

<sup>47</sup> Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, op. cit., 95.

<sup>48</sup> Wendy Ide, “*The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* (review): a mystery worth solving.” *The Guardian*, 4th September 2016. Web. Accessed 12.12.2021.

which engages intensely with Jensen's novel in order to transpose and transform it. On the one hand, it draws out those aspects of the form of the novel which lend themselves particularly to cinematic adaptation: the suspense, the discovery of a mystery to be solved and its unravelling, the riff on the detective story trope. However, on the other hand, it maps the relations between the various parts of the narrative differently from the novel, eliding some, developing others, and deploying its own networks of imagery, most notably in the exploitation of the ocean and in the exposition of the horror genre as background to family life. In other words, Aja's film plots new networks of associations, mapping the characters and events of the story differently from Jensen's novel, but doing so with a degree of inner coherence which results in an adaptation which is in keeping with the complexity and originality of the novel. This is also an adaptation which requires a high degree of engagement from the viewer, who is invited to decode and detect just as much as the reader in the novel – although this invitation is channelled differently, with the shot of Nathalie in sunglasses (figure 2) serving as the most striking example. Ultimately, the very act of transposing Jensen's novel to the visual medium functions as a multi-faceted meta-commentary not only on the original novel, but on the processes of showing and not showing, masking and revealing.