The Electric: a novel and critical commentary investigating narrative disruption in sign language, cinemagoing, and trauma

Thesis

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*The Electric*: a novel and critical commentary investigating narrative disruption in sign language, cinemagoing, and trauma

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**VOLUME 2: A CRITICAL COMMENTARY**
Abstract

*The Electric* is a multi-protagonist novel charting the radiating effects of a death on three generations of a family in East Sussex. The accompanying critical commentary analyses the impact of interdisciplinary research on the creative process, showing how the novel engages with and reflects narrative disruption – a common theme of research in the fields of British Sign Language, cinemagoing, and remembered trauma.

The novel is comprised of two interwoven time-frames. Through the middle part of the twentieth century, Daisy, unhappy in her marriage to an ambitious policeman, takes solace in cinema, and a correspondence with a former soldier from Canada. In the late 1990s, Linda, Daisy’s daughter, and Lucas, her deaf grandson, are still struggling to reconcile themselves to Daisy’s death, which had occurred a decade before. The two narrative strands circle each other, around the traumatic ‘gap’ caused by Daisy’s death. This structure, with its absences, repetitions, and disconnections, reflects the narrative disjunctures faced by the characters.

Each chapter of the critical commentary deals with a separate element which disrupts the novel’s narrative and characters, namely: the effects on memory of relearning a forgotten language; the impact of cinemagoing history on the shape of the novel; and the attempt to articulate remembered trauma. It describes the search for an apt form for these representational challenges. The commentary is also preoccupied with how interdisciplinary research – in such areas as language loss, psychoanalysis, ethnography, and oral history – can shape the content, form, and methodology of a novel.

The novel’s original contribution lies in its representation of dormant memories awakened by Lucas’ relearning of a manual language, and in its structure – which is based on the ‘rolling programmes’ of the mid-twentieth century picturehouses. As a whole, the thesis expresses a way of thinking about the relationship between novelistic form and interdisciplinary reading.
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Introduction

In one sense, this critical commentary is a description of the search for suitable forms with which to address the various representational tasks I faced when writing *The Electric* – tasks such as representing, in prose, the relearning of a manual language; or illustrating, through narrative choices, the difficulties faced by individuals dealing with remembered trauma.

The commentary is organised around the observation that, in my multi-perspective novel, the aspect which unites the characters is that they must all confront linguistic or narrative disjuncture in some form. Each chapter of the commentary takes a separate disruptive element, and charts its influence not only on the character concerned, but also on the formation and structure of the novel.

Chapter one, ‘Deafness, memory, and language relearning’, looks at the disjuncture between the two languages in Lucas’ life: English and British Sign Language (BSL). It examines the extent to which a language can encode memory and reality. In *The Electric*, Lucas’ relearning of sign language brings with it memories of his grandmother which were not accessible to him in English. One of the central issues I explored in Lucas’ narrative was the extent to which language influences the way one understands the world. BSL, as I will explain, has a relationship with narrative time and space which is quite distinct from that of English. It is more visual, and spatial. Also, because there are several separate
‘channels’ for producing meaning in sign language – including the two hands, and
the face – BSL can operate with a greater degree of simultaneity than English, in
which one word must follow the last. As well as influencing Lucas’ worldview,
BSL had a significant impact on the structure of my novel; chapter one describes that
impact.

Chapter two, ‘Fantasy, reality, and disruption: the influence of cinemagoing
history on the form and content of The Electric’, is an exploration of how the oral
histories of cinemagoing shaped my portrayal of Daisy, and the ordering of her story.
The experience of watching films at the cinema changed greatly throughout the
twentieth century. The cinemagoers of Daisy’s generation were accustomed to
buying a ‘seat’ rather than a ‘showing’. A programme – which included a news
broadcast, a short one-reel film, and a main feature – was shown on a loop, and
viewers could arrive and leave at any time. This viewing practice, which resulted in
audience members often seeing the ending of a film before its beginning, was one of
several disruptions to the narrative flow of film presentations. The ‘gaps’ in films –
lacunae which viewers like Daisy became adept at reading, and even exploiting for
pleasure – provided a model for The Electric, which is ordered around the gap
created by Daisy’s death.

The final chapter, ‘Representing remembered trauma in fiction’ covers my
attempt to find a form adequate to the representation of traumatic memory. In
practice, that attempt involved significant experimental drafting, along with the
consultation of a wide range of sources across various disciplines. In writing and re-
writing Linda’s sections, I experimented with a fragmentary, first-person,
epigrammatic style, to suggest the disjointed consciousness of an individual who has
lost (or repressed) the connection with her ‘autobiographical self’ (Sodré, 2014,
Chapter three charts the literary and theoretical influences on that provisional style, and the process by which it was replaced by the more conventional final version.

The commentary is also an account of a complex relationship between factual research and imaginative writing, and not only in the obvious sense of how reading about, for example, 1930s picturehouses, helped me to write fiction about them. The non-fictional research had an impact not only on the content of the novel, but also its form.

Reading across disciplines proved vital in the process of redrafting my characters, making them more psychologically nuanced, textured, and dissenting. For example, the testimonies of the young women who regularly attended the cinema in mid-twentieth century Britain were vital in shaping the later drafts of Daisy. That reading gave me access to Daisy’s interiority, and enabled me to create a character plausibly capable of resisting some of the repressive social and domestic forces she encountered. I elaborate on this process in chapter two.

The research I undertook – historical, theoretical, and experiential – had a profound impact on the narrative design of The Electric. This impact is apparent in a number of ways. Most directly, the narrative disjunctures I encountered in my reading about BSL, cinemagoing, and remembered trauma, are replicated in the structure of the novel, which contains disconnections, repetitions, and gaps. Some of those replications found their way unconsciously into the creative work, and were only noted (and expanded upon, or refined) in retrospect; some of them, as I will describe, were more deliberate. Methodological approaches from other disciplines – such as, for example, ethnography – also influenced the novel’s style.
On another level, the act of transforming new knowledge from other (mainly non-fictional) disciplines into fiction caused me to reflect on the comparative merits of various representational modes, and consider the limits of narrative prose fiction. *The Electric* has a preoccupation with what David Lodge calls ‘the construction of the real within the individual’s consciousness’ (2003, p.49), but it also highlights the factors which disrupt that construction. In researching BSL, and traumatic memory, I came to reflect on the inadequacy of prose narrative as a tool for conveying reality. How can *any* language – an arbitrary system of signs – ‘encode’ a memory? How can the ‘speechless terror’ of a trauma event be expressed linguistically? How can a novel represent ‘the real’? In the following chapters, I’ll discuss the disjuncture between ‘word and world’ (Boxall, 2015, p.60) which haunts *The Electric*.

Methodologically, then, this thesis, considered as a whole, is an interdisciplinary piece of work. As well as reading across subjects such as anthropology, language attrition, literary theory, psychoanalysis, oral history, audience studies, and deaf studies, not to mention fiction, I have also undertaken practical training in order to improve my understanding of the material in the novel. Most importantly, I spent two and a half years learning British Sign Language (BSL), reaching Level Two standard. Such immersive research augmented, and sometimes contradicted my reading, as I’ll explain in chapter one.

It is through this interdisciplinary combination of approaches that I have been able to produce original work. For example: reading fiction and memoir on the experience of learning sign language as a Deaf rite of passage gave me one view of the subject; combining that knowledge with theoretical research into language relearning gave me another angle; studying BSL as a beginner enabled me to add yet
a further layer to my imaginative portrayal of Lucas. My hope is that this multi-faceted research process produced something unique.
This chapter focuses on the manifold narrative disruptions in the life and story of Lucas, one of the central characters in *The Electric*. At the beginning of the novel, particularly, Lucas is caught in a lacuna between two languages. Being deaf, he has limited access to spoken English, and he has lost his first language, British Sign Language (BSL), following his grandmother’s death.

The research and creative practice which produced Lucas’ sections entailed an exploration of the extent to which a language can encode memory and reality. As he relearns BSL, Lucas also begins to dredge up memories of his grandmother – memories that he lost when the language atrophied. Just as I did, when writing the novel, Lucas comes up against the ‘recurrent disjuncture between signs and things, a heightened awareness of the possibility that the name does not quite capture the thing named, or sits at a peculiar, mistaken angle to it.’ (Boxall, 2015, p.30)

Writing Lucas necessitated research into British Sign Language, including two years of formally learning BSL. This commitment to acquiring a knowledge of BSL was driven by several motives. In a way, it resembled the sort of preparation undertaken by actors using the ‘method’ originated by Konstantin Stanislavskii (1936), in order to produce performances of depth and psychological acuity. I felt

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1 In this commentary I employ a distinction between the cultural concept of ‘Deafness’ (with a capital ‘D’), and medical ‘deafness’ (with a lower case ‘d’). Small ‘d’ deafness refers to the physical impairment of hearing. Big ‘D’ Deafness represents a choice to identify with a cultural group. Sometimes, both concepts are relevant, in which case I use ‘D/deaf’.
that if I could understand a little more about sign language, it would help me to see the world from Lucas’ point of view. ²

I also saw BSL as my novel’s ‘second language’, and wanted to investigate the features of that language. In this chapter, I will outline some of those distinctive characteristics. Along with describing its visual and spatial aspects, I will attend to how the manual modality of British Sign Language disturbs the narrative chain of cause and effect that English-speaking³ hearing people are accustomed to. I will also look at how those particular facets of BSL have influenced the structure and form of The Electric.

Representing D/deafness

The representation of deafness by hearing writers is a fascinating subject, and was a central preoccupation during the early work on this thesis. As my novel expanded – both in terms of the number of viewpoint characters, and its themes – the focus of the critical work shifted away from issues of cultural appropriation and non-fictional forms for representing deafness, and those subjects are now, for the most part, beyond the scope of this commentary. However, a brief of account of my early wrestling with the moral implications of representing a D/deaf character is still relevant and necessary to any explanation of how Lucas’ sections were written.

² Additionally, there was an extent to which I wanted my ‘version’ of Lucas to remain open. Edith Sayers (2013, p.303) relates an anecdote about Carson McCullers: ‘When her husband suggested, while she was working on The Heart is a Lonely Hunter that she might want to observe “a convention of deaf mutes in a town nearby...I told him that it was the last thing I wanted to do because I had already made my conception of deaf mutes and didn’t want it to be disturbed.”’ I felt inclined to be more receptive to D/deaf realities.

³ I sometimes refer to an opposition between BSL and English, specifically. This may seem arbitrary, but Lucas, like most BSL users, is surrounded by, and has a knowledge of, English as the dominant British language.
Although it was untypical of my normal working practice, my early approach to Lucas’ story was to formulate a plot for him from the outset. The initial version of that plot is summarised, below:

-Lucas’s grandmother, as one of his primary carers, teaches him British Sign Language as an infant. When he is six years old, she is killed. Lucas’ mother, on the advice of his mainstream school, drops sign language in the home. By the time Lucas is sixteen, he has lost his first language, and struggles by in English.

-Into this situation comes Lisa [Cassie, in the final version], his new support worker. She re-teaches him BSL, and with his re-learning, the traumatic memories of his grandmother’s death – and the happy memories of her life – return to him, encoded in the old language. It is at this point that Lucas discovers that Lisa is having an affair with his father.

Through reading, and casual discussions with D/deaf people, it quickly became clear that this storyline was politically problematic for a number of reasons. The bare bones of the plot correspond quite closely to a well-worn trope in the storytelling tradition of Deaf Culture. Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg call this archetype the ‘success story’:

-In brief: the Deaf protagonist grows up in a hearing environment and has never met any Deaf people. He meets a Deaf person who teaches him sign language and the ways of the Deaf-World. He becomes increasingly involved in that world and leaves his past behind.

(Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg, 2011, p.18)

The similarities to my incipient novel were clear, and as I amassed research, and experienced more Deaf Culture, I began to understand that my original premise was dangerously close to cliché. This story archetype is frequently found in fiction. It
forms the backbone of Carolyn Brimley-Norris’ *Signs Unseen, Sounds Unheard* (1981), and is an important feature in the young life of Abel, a protagonist of *In This Sign*, by Joanne Greenberg (1984). Versions of a story revolving around the contest between sign and spoken language are identifiable in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), and the recent television drama *Switched at Birth* (2012).

This Success Story, featuring a central conflict over the right to sign and the liberation that sign language can bring, is highly political, and the reason for its popularity is illuminated by the briefest encounter with Deaf History. In 1880, the Second International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan led to a resolution banning the use of signed languages in schools, in favour of oral teaching. The effect of this, according to Deaf historians, was to plunge the Deaf community and its individual members into a century of despair (Sacks, 2012). Paddy Ladd documents the failure of oralism, noting that:

> The English literacy level of the profoundly Deaf school leaver (circa 1979) was 8 ¾... in most cases their speech, the very raison d’être of Oralism – was unintelligible to all but their teachers and families.’

(Ladd, 2003, p.28)

Arguably, the repercussions of Milan are still being felt today. Many British Deaf schools still favour the ‘oral’ approach to education, and many Deaf adults only learn BSL after their school years. These educational issues are extremely complex, but in Deaf culture, the use of sign language is frequently seen as a battleground in the Deaf struggle against hearing oppression.

In a novel set in 1990s England, a version of the Success Story – if suitably refreshed by complication – still seemed relevant. The cochlear implant was at that
point still a recent – and highly contentious – invention, and BSL wasn’t officially recognised as a language until March 2003.

However, during informal discussions with Deaf academics, I realised that the differences between my original premise and the classic Success Story were more troubling than the similarities. In the above synopsis, both of Lucas’ instructors in sign language are hearing. Clearly, this enforces the idea of D/deaf people needing to be ‘fixed’ by philanthropic hearing individuals. Even though Lucas’ journey, in the original plot, is marked by a movement towards BSL and Deaf Culture, one of my readers noted the strong colonialist undertones implied by the hearing identity of his language teachers.

Post-colonial theory was used by Harlan Lane (2000) to describe how hearing institutions have, under the guise of philanthropy, oppressed the Deaf cultural minority by banning their languages and constructing a ‘compensatory perspective’ (Ohna, 2004, p.32) which justifies an attempt to ‘wipe out’ Deaf people and their culture using hearing technology and oralist teaching methods.

Some of the eventual changes to the early premise were simply a natural result of research and reading – and were a response to the logistical improbabilities typically found in first drafts. It seemed increasingly unlikely, as I wrote, that Daisy would be able to learn BSL fast enough to adequately instruct the infant Lucas, and so eventually I created a Deaf teacher. Such changes were easily made. Books like Deaf Identities (Darby and Taylor, 2003) – a collection of first person testimonies about the details of growing up D/deaf in Britain – were vital in constructing Lucas’ backstory and early life, and evidence of the obvious fact that there are an infinite number of D/deaf experiences.
Cassie’s position as a hearing teacher of sign also became more nuanced through the drafting process. As Sutton-Spence (2010, p. 281) identifies, the hearing ‘ally’ occupies a position of great ambivalence in the storytelling traditions of Deaf culture, and as my confidence with the material grew, I was able to dramatise this dynamic, particularly in her leaving, which is foreseen by her Deaf brother, Daniel.

After an extended period of reading fiction and theory related to D/deafness, there were a number of eventualities I wanted to avoid. For reasons of both narrative interest and political nuance, I tried to ensure that Lucas’ story did not become a two-dimensional binary war between oralism and integration on the one hand, and a ‘Strong Deaf’ identity, represented by sign language, on the other. Naturally, I wanted to redress the ‘equation of language and speech [that] leads many to question or dismiss the subjectivity of those who do not use spoken languages, and shapes both fictional representations and real life understandings of the deaf’ (Linett, 2013a, p. 446), but by leaving Lucas’ story at a point where he is still making choices about his future, I was hopefully able to lend some fluidity to his D/deaf identity. His repeated insistence, in the closing chapters, that he’ll ‘be both’ is an acknowledgement of bicultural D/deafness as ‘a valid and authentic identity option.’ (McIlroy, 2011)

In a formal sense, the conventions of narrative itself can often lead to a dehumanising of D/deaf characters. In their book on disability in fiction, Narrative Prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder (2001) posit that traditional storytelling comes loaded with its own disenfranchising tendencies. The nature of narrative, they say, is based on fulfilling a lack:

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4 Two annotated anthologies were particularly useful in introducing literary representations of D/deafness: Edna Edith Sayer’s (ed) Outcasts and Angels: The new anthology of Deaf characters in literature (2013); and Angels and Outcasts: An anthology of Deaf characters in literature, edited by Trent Batson and Eugene Bergman (1986).
The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world, and, thus the language of the tale seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line.

(Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.53)

The authors outline a ‘simple schematic of narrative structure’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.53). This begins with a first step summarised as when ‘a deviance or marked difference is exposed to the reader’ (2001, p.53). The story then proceeds until it ‘rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner’, which may include:

* obliteration of the difference through a “cure”, the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being.

(Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.53)

This is very evident in centuries of storytelling from the hearing perspective, which is filled with examples of deafness as a narrative device (for instance, in ‘Mumu’ by Turgenev (1854), where the central character crucially fails to hear a barking dog); deafness as a representative symbol of a social issue (the voicelessness of ‘The Deaf Mute’ in Maupassant’s story (1882)); deaf characters as test-case hypotheses (Lucynell Crater in Flannery O’Connor’s (1955) ‘The Life You Save May Be Your Own’, who functions in order to ask the reader what it takes to be human); and deafness as a problem to be solved by benevolent hearing characters or a fortuitous turn of events (such as the birth of a hearing child to a deaf character at the end of Dickens’ (1865) ‘Doctor Marigold’).
Again, the study of the politics of representing D/deaf identity in fiction by hearing writers would make a fine subject for a thesis. Whilst I can only nod to it here, Mitchell and Snyder’s evaluation of the narrative ‘trap’ – particularly with regard to the story ‘closure’, loaded with moral meaning – had a deep influence on how I structured The Electric, and Lucas’ story in particular. There is little doubt that – in the way that it is perceived by his school, his peers, his parents and himself – Lucas’ deafness is a source of narrative conflict. However, by cross-cutting his strand with those of his mother and grandmother, I have tried to formally disrupt and complicate the propellant narrative drive towards a ‘cure’ or ‘solution’ to his D/deafness.

This broadening of the narrative scope to include Daisy and Linda also enabled me to complicate the content of Lucas’ original story premise. By having Lucas relearn BSL, and by having his (sometimes happy, sometimes traumatic) memories of his grandmother re-enlivened by the relearning, I was hopefully able to add complexity and depth to this particular retelling of the ‘Success Story’. It was my search for ways to reinvigorate a traditional story trope that led to the prime focus on disjuncture which now dominates the novel and accompanying critical commentary.

In the section below, I will discuss how Lucas’ strand became centred on language relearning, and the imperfect way in which language encodes memory and reality.
Language Loss and Memory

In the final version of the novel, Lucas learned BSL in infancy, from a Deaf native signer. His sign language lapsed around the age of seven, shortly after he found the body of his dead grandmother. After his family stopped signing in the home, Lucas gradually forgot his first language.

When we first meet him in *The Electric*, Lucas has no memory of the traumatic incident which killed Daisy, and little memory of their time together. He attends a mainstream school (Watson, Gregory, and Powers, 1999), wears hearing aids, and conducts his learning orally. Into this situation comes Cassie, a young teaching assistant with a Deaf brother, who teaches Lucas to sign again. As a result of the reacquaintance with his first language, Lucas dredges up fragments of memory from the times (both happy and disturbing) that he spent with his grandmother. The early sensations of this process are described in the passage below:

One day, in late November, he signs the question *what did you do yesterday*, and as his finger flicks at his shoulder, he feels this tremendous surge through his body. It is as if his arm is simply remembering what to do. He does not have to translate the thought. It flows through his muscles, and he watches the tendons do their work. It feels as though the language is coming from a place inside him. Like a door has opened in some dank chamber. And there’s more than just language in there. There are memories, images.

(*The Electric*, ch.3)

A month later, he will have his first extremely vivid memory of his grandmother, in which she signs the phrase, ‘Where are my spectacles?’ Gradually, as his sign language skills increase, Lucas begins to circle closer to the more painful memories surrounding her death.
In Lucas’ case, the process of retrieving these memories ‘encoded’ in the lost first language is inextricably bound up with trauma. The repression of the recall of his grandmother, and the disturbing vividness with which these memories reappear, are based on theory and case studies of those suffering from PTSD. The overlap between trauma, language loss and memory is an important facet of the story. For those exclusively studying the scientific specifics of first language loss and memory, Lucas might not make a good subject for experimentation because the traumatic circumstances of his language attrition cloud the issue. Fiction does not need such controls. However, for the purposes of clarity, I will perform an artificial separation in this critical commentary, examining language and memory in this chapter, and studying Lucas’ remembered trauma more deeply in chapter three.

The evolution of the premise of Lucas’ story, culminating in the formulation of the dramatic situation summarised above, arose from research into the field of first language loss and memory. As much as writing about memory required a search for apt formal techniques, I also wanted to ensure that Lucas was a psychologically plausible character.

Initially, my question was whether it was realistic to suggest that a child would forget an embedded language over a period of ten years. The work of Kouritzin (2009) and Pallier (2007) was helpful in that respect. Pallier, who analysed critical periods for language acquisition, studied a group of Korean children adopted by (French-speaking) families in France between three and ten years old. As young adults, the adoptees, who now spoke fluent French with no detectable accent, all claimed to have forgotten Korean, and the authors of the study could find no trace of first language knowledge in the speakers, even with fMRI imaging.
Anecdotally, the same findings are inferred in *Face(t)s of First Language Loss* (Kouritzin, 1999), in which various respondents describe their experiences of losing – and sometimes regaining – their first language. Brian, a Canadian who also, coincidentally, learned and forgot Korean, echoes a familiar experience: ‘If my parents hadn’t told me all these years, I wouldn’t even have known that I spoke Korean.’ (Kouritzin, 1999, p.116)

It is also worth noting, at this point, that several of Kouritzin’s informants report that the loss of their first language commenced with the death of, or separation from, a grandparent.

The second facet of language that I needed to research was the relationship between the ability to remember an event, and the language skills of the observer at the time of that incident. Do we remember *in a language*? Would Lucas remember his grandmother in BSL? These are complex questions. Freud’s theories of infantile amnesia may be just as relevant as linguistic analysis, here. But for the purposes of examining the plausibility of Lucas’ dramatic scenario, there is evidence that language is a vital tool for recording experience. Burch et al (2008, p.518) focused on autobiographical recall in deaf and hearing adults, and reported that ‘Children who possessed greater linguistic skill at the time of the event were able to encode the experience, indicating a role for verbal ability as important for encoding experiences’. Simcock and Hayne (2002, p.225) come to a similar conclusion in their study of remembered events, noting that, ‘in no instance did a child verbally report information about the event that was not part of his or her productive vocabulary at the time of encoding.’

The final element of language and memory that I researched was the effect of *relearning* a forgotten language. The work of Terry Kit-fong Au (2011) was
important, here. Au poses two thought-provoking questions about language relearning:

1. If adolescents and adults re-learn their childhood language, will the re-learning activate their childhood memory for other kinds of experience as well?

2. If we were to find a compelling case of language structure shaping children’s habitual and automatic cognition, would such cognitive effects persist even if the children ‘lost’ the language after years of disuse? If not, would the children develop new worldviews if they became monolingual in a drastically different language? What might happen if they were to re-learn their childhood language as adults? Would their habitual and automatic cognition revert to their childhood worldview?

(Kit-fong Au, 2011, p.183-184)

The interesting aspect of the questions above is that neither is conclusively answered in Au’s study. In that sense, they are very appealing to the writer of fiction, and I spent much of Lucas’ story exploring those questions, both in terms of the content of the narrative, and in the way it was written. If language can shape a child’s ‘habitual and automatic cognition’ and ‘worldview’, then – I hypothesised – it must also have an effect on how their life is narrativised. So, in Lucas’ case, as his two languages – BSL and English – come into conflict, he is experiencing a disjuncture between two ways of understanding his autobiographical self.

Au speaks hypothetically of a person who learns two ‘drastically different’ languages. I would argue that – as a language in a different modality – BSL certainly qualifies as drastically distinct from the English in which Lucas conducts his life at the beginning of the novel. In any case, it became clear, through my research and practice, that if I was to write about the impact of BSL, as a revived
language, on Lucas’ worldview, I would need to look closely at the distinctive qualities and characteristics of that language. I knew I would have to think hard about how the nature of BSL might influence the form of my novel. My earliest question might have been, ‘How does one write about BSL?’, but that had now evolved to become, ‘How does BSL describe experience?’

The Nature of BSL

British Sign Language is made up of several constituent parts which are used in combination to produce meaning. Manual signs are made with the hands. There are 57 handshapes, each of which can be deployed in numerous locations around the body (i.e. in the ‘signing space’ – from just above the head to the waist, from elbow to elbow in width, and forward to the extent of the reach). The movement of the handshape is also significant in producing meaning. Both hands are used.

Non-manual features are an important part of the language. These are signs made with the eyes, the mouth, the head and shoulders. They can be used for grammatical and lexical purposes. Fingerspelling – a manual alphabet – is used mainly for the initial spelling of proper nouns in English.

All of the above components are used together to create an almost inexhaustible vocabulary which is very different to the spoken English by which most BSL users find themselves surrounded every day. Clearly, in less than three years of learning BSL, I had little chance of becoming a strong user of the language. I have tried to use my beginner status as an advantage to the novel. Lucas’
experience of relearning the language he forgot has at least some parallels with my attempts to learn it for the first time. He brings with him the same freshness of vision, and tendency to notice and comment upon the particularities of the language.

I had a model, here, in Xiaolu Guo’s (2007) *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. Guo, who had recently arrived in the UK as a film student, decided to write a novel in English, which is not her first language, for the ‘intellectual challenge’ (TimeOut Beijing, 2015). *Dictionary for Lovers* is written in the narrator’s broken – though gradually improving – English, and draws parallels between the linguistic features of English, and the culture of the country as seen through the eyes of a newcomer. For example, in the extract below, Z – the narrator – makes a comparative analysis of the effects of English sentence structure:

> Last autumn on the Great Wall we eat barbecue.

So time and space always bigger than little human in our country. Is not like order in English sentence, ‘I’, or ‘Jake’ or ‘Mary’ by front of everything, supposing be most important thing to whole sentence.’

(Guo, 2007, p. 26)

Guo is able to humorously comment, here, through the language, on what the narrator sees as the individualistic nature of English society. Politically, the direction of travel in *The Electric* is different. Lucas is attempting to learn a minority language in his country of birth. But, like Z, Lucas is still able to see the cultural significance of the features of the language.
One important feature in BSL is point-of-view. This is a technique whereby the signer can switch perspective to any character in the story they are telling. The signer can also alter what John Gardner (1984, p.111) might call their ‘psychic distance’ from the character. They might establish a space containing several characters in a pub, for example, but then focus in on the consciousness and viewpoint of one particular drinker, assuming their facial expressions and inhabiting their thoughts. In the extract below, Cassie and Lucas discuss ‘point-of-view’ in BSL.

They must keep their language secret, so she draws the concertina partition in the Basin, and writes down POINT OF VIEW in her black notebook. *Very important for BSL*, she signs. *It was one of the first things my brother taught me.*

Outside, the world is slowly dripping with thawed frost. It makes the trees look like they are coated in silver goop.

*If you’re telling a story*, she signs, *you first put the person in a scene.* *Think of it like a film. You have the long shot...*

With her hands she creates a thick dark forest, which hangs in the room. She makes the sun plummet in the sky. Her fingers become the legs of a tired old man, walking through the trees. She points to the lonely wanderer.

‘So there he is,’ she says, using her voice. ‘But now go to the close-up. Now, you become him.’

And, just like that, she is the old man – two fingers dragged down her face. She makes him hunched over, heavy-browed, looking up apprehensively at the trees. She shows him thinking of his wife. There is an owl in the branches. Cassie describes – and then becomes – the owl, looking down on the man.

Lucas shivers with recognition.

Cassie straightens up, smoothes her blouse, and re-enters herself. ‘You see, every deaf story is a first person story,’ she says. ‘You become each characters, you switch roles. It’s very...’

‘Very what?’

She signs the word, but he doesn’t understand, so she writes it in her notebook. *COMPASSIONATE.*

‘Oh,’ he says.

*My brother used to say that signing helps you think of others. Then he’d hit me around the head.*
So, using Lucas’ language relearning as a structural tool for the narrative became important. Lucas learns the language in front of the reader, but the language teaches him other things, too. I hoped this technique would allow English-language readers some unobtrusive access to the particularities of BSL, while advancing Lucas’ coming-of-age story.

In the sections below, I will briefly and critically examine some of the claims often made about the distinctive nature of sign language, and show how those characteristics may have informed Lucas’ strand of the narrative, and influenced (as well as disrupted) the form and structure of the novel as a whole.

**BSL as a Spatial Language**

In his description of the benefits of signed languages, Oliver Sacks (1989, p.89) quotes William Stokoe (1979), who said that ‘speech has only one dimension – its extension in time. Writing has two dimensions. Models have three, but only signed languages have at their disposal four dimensions.’ Stokoe is referring, there, to time, along with the three dimensions of the signing space. In this sense, BSL is often described as a spatial language.

Even in the early stages of learning BSL, students are encouraged to think spatially. Directions, and very detailed descriptions of places, are significant elements in the teaching materials (Signature, 2017). The hearing student becomes aware, even through the simple task of describing a bedroom, that the concept of space is very different in BSL than it is in English. One must *build* the bedroom in
the signing space. The objects one chooses to describe – the bed, the wall, the desk, the window – must be placed in relation to each other. That relationship must be accurate and consistent. In a manual sign language, a described space becomes more visual, more literally replicated, than it is in speech.

Directions and descriptions are only the simplest ways in which space is important in BSL. The signing space is used grammatically, too, and to organise stories. It is possible, through the linguistic tool known as ‘placement’, to quickly switch between two referents. If, for example, a signer wants to compare two pets, she could describe a cat first, and locate it firmly to the right of her signing space, before describing the dog over to her left. Once the placement of the animals has been established, the signer only has to point, or direct her gaze to the relevant location, in order to refer to either animal.

Placement is another of Cassie’s ‘lessons’ in the novel. Lucas’ history – the loss of his beloved grandmother, the emotional retreat of his mother, his father’s departure from the family home – suggests a character with anxieties around attachment. I tried to reflect this in the features of BSL described in the novel. Placement, for example, becomes emblematic of his understandable fear of abandonment. He reflects on this after Cassie’s departure:

At form period, he remembers Cassie’s lesson on placement. In his mind, he sees her hands as she tells the story: a girl by the rocks, on one side, and a boy preparing for a journey, on the other. ‘Do you understand?’ she’d asked him. Yes, he thinks now, I do understand. The girl, like the rocks, is still there. The point is that she’s supposed to be still there.

(The Electric, ch.18)
I would propose that every language has its own way of dealing with time. Turning back to *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers*, we can see Guo comparing the treatment of time in Chinese and English, with relevance to a love affair: “‘Love’ in English, has tense. That means ‘Love is a time-limited thing. Not infinite.’” Guo’s narrator says that in Chinese, ‘love…has no tense…if our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last for ever. It will be infinite.’ (Guo, 2007, p.301)

Behind the apparently naïve voice, there is great subtlety in Guo’s word selection, here. She uses the ambiguous perfect form, ‘if our love existed’, with its trace of something that has already ended. Z is a character fighting against time in a language which constantly restates its passing.

The relationship between space and time, in BSL, is complex. BSL can mark tenses using signs at the beginning of sentences. The signs WILL, NOW, and FINISH refer to future, present, and past, respectively, and signers often begin a sentence with a temporal marker such as YESTERDAY, or BEFORE. However, as Dorothy Miles (1988, p.97) states, ‘a far richer source of information about time is the use of different zones in the signing space to convey different ideas about the passage of time.’ In reality, this is very subtle, but at the most basic level, signs originating from behind the body or at the shoulder denote the past, signs made on the body denote the present, and signs at the extent of the reach refer to future actions. Signers, then, use space to denote time.

It is important to avoid false dichotomies. W.J.T Mitchell reflects on:

the common mistake of regarding space and time as antithetical modalities […] reflected in the tendency of literary critics to speak of spatial form as ‘static’ or ‘frozen’, or as involving some simultaneous, instantaneous, and wholistic impression of that which is ‘really’ temporal.
However, from the evidence above, it seems fair to say that BSL, as a visual language, leans on spatial aspects to a greater extent than English. I will provide further examples of how it does that, below. In practice, I was faced with the task of representing how English and BSL have different relationships to space and time, in prose. To reiterate, when Lucas relearns BSL, there are moments when he reverts to his old ‘worldview’, as Au would put it. The way he understands space and time in his first language, is different. I used several methods to suggest this.

Firstly, Lucas’ flashback memories are written with a greater focus on space. Whilst they are not ‘static’, those vignettes do not extend far through time. They are temporally contained. They focus on environmental space, such as the sticky floor of a cinema, or the lighting arrangements of a café. Lucas’ memory of his grandmother ‘sneaking’ out of the house to go to the cinema features a compression of two time-frames into one space, in its introduction: ‘He rose from bed and stood at the window, just as he does now.’ And after that, the scene places Daisy beneath the streetlight. It is preoccupied with that particular lit space, in both time frames, to the extent that when Daisy leaves the area of the streetlight, Lucas continues to look at it, rather than following his grandmother’s movement:

His Nanna blew him a kiss and signed thank you – the gestures were almost the same. She looked left and right and then slipped out of the light. She became darker, until she was part of the street. A moment later, a fox crept under the streetlight, looked at Lucas, and then bolted.

(The Electric, ch.5)
Again, these memories are not ‘static’. They are not devoid of narrative time or movement, but they are not quite stories. The balance between space and time is simply different from the other scenes in the section. I tried to think of it like the mixing desk in a music studio, where I could adjust the levels: in Lucas’ memories, space is turned up, and time is turned down.

Throughout Lucas’ section, he becomes more adept at working with spaces, both mentally and physically. He gradually builds a picture of his grandmother’s old living room, as it was in the moments before her death. At one point, early in his relearning, and without knowing it, Lucas begins to recall some of the details of the day Daisy died: ‘There are other memory crumbs: a candle, a shed. He just has to wait.’

Later, Lucas applies the spatial mastery he has reacquired with sign language to examine and manipulate his memory of the living room:

But now, in the alleyway, another room abruptly comes to him, and the memory is so vivid, he stops walking. He focuses on the image. He delves into the memory and looks around it, as Cassie has taught him. He sees a brown, corduroy, button-backed sofa, and a leather strap of horse bells on the wall. A shelf of videos stands on the right, next to a television with a wooden side and metal teeth for the channels. Lucas is in the room, younger, sat before the television. Summer light comes over his shoulder, making reflections in the TV screen, so he can’t see the programme.

Lucas rotates the image, and sees a set of patio doors. Outside the doors, in the garden, a man is standing by the shed. It is Lucas’ grandfather. He is looking up at the house – at the roof or the top windows. In one hand he has a garden tool, in the other hand a white handkerchief.

(The Electric, ch.13)

Lucas’ spatial skill develops as he relearns sign language. This is a marker of the return of the BSL ‘worldview’ that he inherited when he first learned to sign. As
I will discuss below, temporal disjuncture is an element common to all of the narrative strands, and it is built into the overall structure of the novel. Time is rarely allowed to pass without disruption. The 1990s timeframe – already twenty years distant from the reader’s reality – is regularly interrupted by Daisy’s sections, the events of which threaten to rise up more violently in the consciousness and memories of the other two characters.

Another sense in which BSL and English perhaps differ is the area of narrative. Lucas is someone who is trying to understand his own story – his past and his present. Negotiating the different storytelling modes of his two languages is an important skill for Lucas, as he tries to narrativise his life. In the section below, I will examine the idea of simultaneity in BSL, and the repercussions that had on my narrative choices in the novel.

Simultaneity vs. Linearity: BSL and Narrative Disjuncture

It was necessary to take into account the distinctive visuo-spatial nature of BSL when writing about the impact of Lucas’ relearning of sign language on his consciousness and memories. This was simply a matter of creating a psychologically plausible character. As briefly stated above, BSL also had an effect on the narrative structure of the novel as a whole.

At first, it can be difficult to fully comprehend the significance of defining BSL as a spatial language. As Mary Brennan (1981, p.120) says, ‘Of course sign languages occur in space but why should that be particularly important?’ Indeed, we
might also say that sign language happens in time, or that spoken/written English is perfectly capable of making sense of spatial matters.

Brennan answers her own question with clarity and detail. There is a certain amount of simultaneity possible in sign language, she states, because ‘signers have two hands, each able to express separate units of meaning, and non-manual articulators, such as the eyes, mouth, face, head and shoulders.’ (Brennan, 1993, p.15) On a fundamental level, this disrupts the idea of the sentence as a sequential, linear construct. In contrast, spoken languages use discrete words which ‘occur over time, one after the other, and they can be analysed in sequential terms.’ (Brennan, 1981, p.120)

Brennan gives an excellent clarifying example from her analysis of a signer:

At any one point in time, several linguistic forms can be produced simultaneously. One of our informants produced a signed sentence which could be translated as: “I used to sit and stare at the teacher without understanding a thing.” If one freezes the film at exactly the right moment, all of that information can be encapsulated.

(Brennan, 1981, p.121)

So, a sentence which might take five seconds in speech, is produced and understood, using BSL, in no time at all. This has repercussions for narrative suspense. Beginning a sentence, in English, with ‘I used to sit and stare at the teacher…’ leaves us with a certain amount of small-scale narrative mystery. We might finish that sentence any number of ways. We might say: ‘…with whom I was totally in love’, or ‘…to make sure she wasn’t looking’.
The simultaneity of BSL somewhat undercuts that suspense, because the end of the sentence is present at the same time as the beginning. We do not wait for closure. Temporal order is not manipulated for the same narrative gains. Of course, this does not mean that it’s impossible to tell a linear story in BSL. It may be that the instantaneously-produced sign sentence above was part of a linear sequence of such sign units culminating in a very traditional story. As I will demonstrate below, storytelling is a hugely important part of Deaf culture, but there are subtle differences in narrative emphasis when compared to traditional stories in English. I would argue that some of these differences are a result of the contrasting relationships between time and space in the two languages.

Rachel Sutton-Spence (2010, p. 272) points out that ‘there appears to be a strong awareness among Deaf people that signing is especially for storytelling’, and that was borne out by my own experiences with Deaf culture. My BSL teacher spent break-times telling stories about her life and experience, in sign language. The teaching and assessment of British Sign Language is based around the understanding and forming of short anecdotes. The receptive exam features a number of signed stories on which candidates are quizzed (I recall an anecdote about a Deaf Club trip to the set of Coronation Street, and a story about a tent pole falling on a child at a fairground). Promotion for learning support materials often centres on the number of ‘stories’ included in the package. (Level 3 Stories, n.d.)

Sutton-Spence notes:

Non-fictional narratives in the form of personal experience narratives […] are widespread and viewed as a core of Deaf cultural life. In BSL, these narratives may be presented as the storyteller’s experiences, or the experiences of ‘someone very like’ real community members. Such stories teach Deaf children about their community and their place within it.
In a sense, the search for a coherent autobiographical narrative is the driving force of Lucas’ section. There are several obstacles which impede him in this aim: trauma and repression (as I will explain more fully in chapter three); the generally problematic relationship between memory, reality, and narrative; and the fact that he is trying to construct his narrative in two very different languages.

Whilst storytelling is clearly a vital facet of Deaf Culture, the narrative emphasis of BSL stories is subtly different. ‘BSL storytelling traditions tend to take shape in terms of narration style and thematic content, centring on performance of, and themes of, the narratives rather than on identifiable fictional plots.’ (Sutton-Spence, 2010, p.273) I experienced this at Deafinitely Theatre’s BSL performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at Shakespeare’s Globe (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2014) During the lavish, playful and extremely visual staging, two LCD screens off to the side of the stage gave a very brief ticker-tape summary of each scene. It seemed significant both that the narrative exposition should be cast off to the margins of the audience viewpoint, and also that the only real nod to English translation was the bare bones of the plot. I soon stopped looking at the screens. In a performance rich in character, imagery, movement, and even music, the plot was not the point.

I might add to the above reflections on the narrative of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that I already knew what was going to happen. This is one of the ways that the simultaneity of sign language is represented in the structure of *The Electric*. Whilst there is the unravelling of a mystery at the centre of the novel, the narrative
suspense is flattened and undermined by the ordering of the strands. The reader knows, before the first encounter with Daisy, that she will die violently. Going back and forth in time between the strands, and having Daisy’s life and death intrude into the lives of Linda and Lucas, again replicates the sense that everything is happening at the same time.

In chapter sixteen, Daisy’s strand concludes with the day of her death, experienced from her point of view. Either side of this, chapters fifteen and seventeen feature the conversation in which an elderly Paul Landry reveals to Linda what really happened, eleven years before. The reader does not hear Paul’s actual revelation, only the moments before, and the moments after. It is implied that his explanation of events is given during the gap between chapters fifteen and seventeen – a gap in which the reader is experiencing the events themselves from Daisy’s perspective. Time is compressed, here, into the space of the novel. The years between Daisy’s death and Linda’s discovery of its true circumstances, are wiped away.

The drive of linear exposition is undercut in Lucas’ strand, too. The reader knows, from Linda’s point-of-view sections, that Lucas found his grandparents after the shooting. Lucas never explicitly remembers the moment he walked into their room. That moment, which might appear to be the natural climax of the story of his recovered memories, is de-emphasised in favour of a story which focuses more on his character development – his realisation that he can avoid the binary choice so often presented to D/deaf young people.

Lucas himself, through his learning of sign language, comes to a conclusion about the nature of BSL narrative that functions as a key to the reading of the novel:
He has always thought that English is like a train. Word follows word; the engine drags the carriage. Action leads to reaction; consequences flow from left to right. ‘And then, and then, and then.’

Cassie taught him that there is no ‘and then’ in sign. Things happen simultaneously. You don’t wait for the next word, for what comes next, because it’s already happening. Your right hand is a falling tree (your puffed cheeks tell of its size), and your left hand is the man who stands beneath it. It all happens before your very eyes, inevitable.

(The Electric, ch.18)

This undermining of linear, sequential plot echoes the concerns about ‘narrative prosthesis’ discussed in the early part of this chapter. The narrative propulsion of the search for a ‘solution’ to Lucas’ ‘lack’ (in this case, lack of hearing) is – whilst not altogether removed – certainly resisted. One could argue that Lucas’ decision to be ‘both’ hearing and Deaf – to be bilingual – is simply a more liberal narrative solution to the ‘problem’ of his D/deafness. But I would hope that the complications of his family life, and his early trauma, do enough to strongly suggest that his hearing status was never the problem at all, but simply a convenient mask behind which the adults in his life hid the true issues.

BSL as Filmic and Fragmentary

Although sign language preceded the invention of film by many centuries, there is little doubt that film techniques influence the current teaching and analysis of BSL and other manual languages. Dorothy Miles gives a solid explanation:

Without having to think about it, a good signer produces the same effects as in film-making, moving rapidly between close-up, mid-shot and longshot…As he
changes from one ‘shot’ to another, he may use the cut (a straightforward change of sign), the freeze (where one sign remains in the air while something else happens on the face or the other hand), and even the zoom and fade.’

(Miles, 1988, p.96)

In the extract from The Electric, presented earlier in this chapter, Cassie gives a similar analysis of moving between long-shots and POV shots. The ‘role shift’ is another very important – and quite filmic – feature of BSL. Role-shifting is when a signer reports an exchange of dialogue by turning the body to represent a switch between the principals. For example, if I was to report a sign conversation between an adult and a child, I might make my signs smaller when performing the part of the child, and direct my gaze upward and (let’s say) to the right. When shifting roles to perform the adult, I would turn my shoulders and look down and to the left, thus matching the eye-lines; my signs would be bigger, and my facial expression might become stern and paternal. This technique has commonalities with the eye-line matching used in film editing, and the ‘180 degree rule’ – some of the basic ways in which film-makers help viewers to understand space.

Commentators sometimes use the similarity between sign and film to make broader points about the nature of sign language. Oliver Sacks (1989, p.89) describes sign as ‘not merely prose-like…in structure, but essentially cinematic, too.’ This, he says, again quoting Stokoe (1979), as well as echoing Dorothy Miles, has implications for stories related in sign:

Narrative is no longer linear and prosaic, instead the essence of sign language is to cut from a normal view to a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again and so on, even including flashback and flash-forward scenes.
There is in fact much to untangle, here, in the way Sacks and Stokoe characterise sign language and film, and it is important for the writer of fiction to be critically attentive to such statements. To put sign language and film in opposition to ‘traditional, linear storytelling’ is problematic, to say the least. Films very frequently tell stories. They do so in scenes which are, to a certain extent, fragments, but those fragments often cohere perfectly well to make a linear narrative. Stokoe assigns linearity to prose without any explanation, and without dealing with the objection that a prose novel is just as likely to contain flashbacks. However, his points about sign language being cinematic and non-linear are worthy of investigation.

Emanuella Laborit’s *The Cry of the Gull* (1999) was a strong influence on my early drafts of Lucas’ section. The memoir is notable not only for the story it tells, but for the context of its assembly. Laborit, a French actress who was Deaf from birth, is operating across two languages, here. Her first language is LSF (French sign language), but she composed the first draft of *The Cry of the Gull* in written French. She then worked with a professional writer and an LSF interpreter to revise the book, and to sign certain sections which were then translated into French (Lindgren, 2012). This unusual working method brings us perhaps as close as we can get to seeing the nature of sign language transposed into prose. What we find in the final version is a collection of short ‘vignettes centred on a particular image or memory.’ (Lindgren, 2012, p 353).

Laborit (1999) also uses typographical variations, indents and tense switches to flag up the more visceral, visual memories. These are clearly labelled as flashbacks,
and an example is given below (I have reproduced an image of the text, here, to maintain the visual integrity of the typography:

(Laborit, 1999, p.15)
One can see the influence of Laborit’s stark, isolated memories on the sections in which Lucas remembers his grandmother, in *The Electric*, although Laborit ‘cuts’ more abruptly between scenes, trusting the reader to make sense of the gaps in time. Typographically, and in the present tense ‘scene setting’, above, the page resembles a film script. There is also a strongly visual flavour to the writing. These techniques are, broadly speaking, ‘cinematic’. Lindgren, in her analysis of Laborit’s work, suggests that this fragmented style is more a structural crossover from Deaf autobiographical storytelling, where sign language stories ‘take the form of vignettes that focus on a single event.’ (Lindgren, 2012, p353)

So, it might be easy to say that Laborit’s work is an example of the ties between film, sign, and a fragmentary way of writing. However, there is something more complicated happening in *The Cry of the Gull*. There is a relationship between the fragmented, visual form, and the distinctive nature of memory (particularly pre-lingual Deaf memory). Laborit (1999, p7), who came to sign language only after struggling with oralism in her early school years, speaks of perceptions which ‘dwell in a turmoil that is out of memory’s reach.’ These memories cannot be properly accessed, she argues, because ‘words were mysterious and language was absent’ (Laborit, 1999, p7). There are echoes, here, of course, with Lucas’ situation, and the academic work on which it was founded. If ‘language forms a very important basis for storage of real life events’ (Kyle, 1981, p.72), and if children fail to report remembered incidents that are ‘not part of his or her productive vocabulary at the time of encoding’ (Simcock and Hayne, 2002, p. 225), then it stands to reason that Laborit’s early, pre-lingual memories remain inaccessible.

In representing this predicament, Laborit is very conscious of the technical choices she makes as a writer. She describes her early childhood memories as ‘a
chaos in my head, a series of completely unrelated images, like film sequences edited together with long strips of blank film, giant lost spaces.’ (Laborit, 1999, p7)

This reads like a rationale of her fragmented style, and she writes eloquently of how her lack of language debarred her from even the concept of narrative time:

‘Everything was on the same time-space line. Mother would say yesterday, but I didn’t understand where or what yesterday was.’ (Laborit, 1999, p7)

Laborit’s decision to write in non-linear, disconnected fragments and images is not, I would suggest, an attempt to portray sign languages as essentially fragmentary; she chooses that form because of the linguistic circumstances of her early life – because she had no language. Lucas was more fortunate in some respects. He did have a language in which to capture his early memories. He had the linguistic tools to make sense of the concept of time. In the drafting process, I toned down the fragmentary nature of his sections, and smoothed out the more abrupt switches in time frames, for those reasons.

The situation is complicated for both Lucas and Laborit. Their narrative presentations are clearly influenced by the nature of sign language – Lucas’ more so as he relearns BSL. Both of them share a sense of time and space which is structurally inflected by manual languages. However, the fragmentary exposition of their stories relates more to a lack of early language, in Laborit’s case, and a loss of it, in Lucas’. More than that, as I will describe in chapter three, it is trauma which causes the most severe narrative disjuncture in Lucas’ ability to understand his story.

Laborit, in discussing the influence of cinema on her structural choices, provides a link between two of the central characters in The Electric, and introduces the theme of the following chapter. Her ‘long strips of blank film, lost spaces’ echo not only the memories that Lucas attempts to retrieve, but also – more directly – the
cinemagoing habits of Daisy, Lucas’ grandmother. In chapter two, I will look at how my research into cinema audiences of the mid-twentieth century provided a third linguistic influence on this novel – one with its own narrative disruptions and disjunctures.
In the previous chapter, I examined the importance of language modality – and language disruption – in the attempt to access memory. In writing Lucas’ story, I had created a character who wrested back control of language, in order to resist conventional binary choices about identity. Through his gradually sharpening linguistic skills, Lucas unearths memories ‘encoded’ in BSL. The relearned language also helps him to sharpen his perception of the physical present. His apprehension of space and detail improves as he picks up BSL again, causing objects to ‘bloom out of the blur’.

There are many parallels in Daisy’s strand of the novel. Whereas Lucas battled disruptions in language, the emphasis in Daisy’s sections is on her engagement with the often broken narratives to which she is exposed during a lifetime of cinemagoing. Like Lucas, Daisy is part of a group (in this case, police-wives of the early and mid-twentieth century) which history considers to have been oppressed. In this chapter I will explain how Daisy’s visits to the cinema, and her
creative agency as an active reader of films, can be seen as tools of resistance. Through these activities, Daisy gains an empowering awareness of ‘alternatives’ in her life.

The chapter has three sections. Firstly, by way of initially connecting the two chapters, I will briefly chart the relationship between Deaf history and film, including the effects of ‘talkies’ on the deaf audience. I will show how Lucas’ unorthodox method of reading films shapes his relationship with his grandmother.

In the second section, I will outline how my research into the oral histories of cinemagoing gave me an insight into the potential of someone like Daisy to resist the oppressive nature of her predicament. If my early drafts contained a central character who was too passive, it was cinemagoing history which inspired and legitimised my later attempts to liberate her.

The third section of the chapter relates to form. In my cinemagoing research, narrative disruption was a recurring theme – particularly in terms of how films were shown on rolling programmes. In that final section, I will examine how mid-century cinemagoing practices, and the space of the Brighton picturehouses themselves, provoked questions of form. How might one shape a novel about the compressions, gaps and disjunctures in storytelling time? And how might such phenomena shape the novel’s characters?
Part One: Deafness and Film History

Before concentrating on Daisy’s sections of the novel, it may be useful to outline how the cinema is a site of overlap for the character strands, particularly Daisy and Lucas. Chapter one examined the ways in which BSL is a visuo-spatial language that is sometimes said to metaphorically resemble film in its formal techniques. But, in my research, I also saw that cinema plays an unusual and poignant role in Deaf history, and I tried to make that present in the novel.

In charting the link between deaf history and films, we have to go back to the early 1900s. In the previous chapter, I recounted the marginalisation of Deaf people throughout history, but John S Schuchman (1989) identifies cinemagoing during the silent movie period as an activity which united Deaf and hearing people in an unprecedented way (particularly in the US). He quotes an unnamed D/deaf actress reflecting on the importance of silent films to the Deaf:

For those who could not read with ease – and many deaf persons could not – the silent film with its single captions was a substitute for books and newspapers, a source of fact and fantasy, a stimulus for invention, imagination and imitation. [Since silent film required visual concentration] most deaf persons in the audience at a silent film were equal to, if not better equipped than their hearing neighbours. More than that, they were able to share, on the same terms of comprehension, in a public response to an artistic experience.

(Schuchman, 1989, p. 58)

Silent films were based around visual action, gesture, and captions. They contained no dialogue, and were therefore accessible to D/deaf people in a way that theatre never had been. The response to early film and cinema in the Deaf
community was one of great excitement, and not just for the sense of entertainment, and engagement with a cultural form. Deaf community leaders saw that films ‘could be used to preserve the beauty of sign language, and educators of the deaf quickly pointed out the pedagogical value of film to visually-oriented deaf children.’ (Schuchman, 1989, p59) Soon enough, the film projector became a must-have item in Deaf residential schools. It was a powerful way of accessing news, education and entertainment. Schuchman (1989, p.75) claims that the ‘silent movie era represents the only time in the cultural history of the United States when deaf persons could participate in one of the performing arts with their hearing peers on a comparatively equal basis.’ But it was not to last.

There is no doubt that the early twentieth century was an explosive time in the relationship between D/deaf people and technology. Inventors such as Alexander Graham Bell (whose wife was deaf), and Thomas Edison (who was hard-of-hearing), received much publicity, but their promotion of oral education divided the Deaf community. The complexities of this fascinating history, including the onscreen portrayals of deaf characters in silent films, are beyond the scope of this commentary. The fate of silent films and their Deaf audience, however, has a strong background relevance to my novel, because it is an example of large-scale narrative disruption, and feeds directly into the life of Lucas, many years later.

The silent era of cinema was very brief – around thirty years, with a peak period of fifteen. And so, the introduction of ‘talkies’ – films with full audio and dialogue – reversed many of the benefits of cinemagoing for the D/deaf. Suddenly, films became indecipherable, and D/deaf viewers no longer had the same access to the story as their hearing peers. There was no way around it. Elwood Stevenson, who was chair of a committee established to obtain captions for films, stated that ‘it
is practically impossible for even expert lipreaders to follow the talking pictures under the best of conditions.’ (Schuchman, 1989, p.65)

Stevenson and other US campaigners for subtitles would have a long wait. After the phasing-out of the silent film in the early 1930s, it would be fifty years before the widespread availability of captioned TV in America. Schuchman (1989, p. 74) argues that ‘the demise of the silent film represented an educational tragedy for deaf children.’

While that’s clearly true, researching British Deaf history gave me my first insight into the ingenious solutions that people find when dealing with such narrative disruption. One of the most moving and powerful anecdotes I came across in my research was provided by a respondent in Paddy Ladd’s *Understanding Deaf Culture* (2003). The respondent was educated at an oral residential school where forbidden sign flourished as an underground language amongst the children in the dorms. He speaks of how he, as a poor child, would eagerly await the return of richer children from the school holidays: ‘We’d beg them to go to the pictures so that they could get some more stories.’ And, of course, Ladd notes the creative work that had to be done to produce these stories, because the viewers of the films, ‘obviously unable to hear the film dialogue, superimposed their own plot theories onto the original.’ (Ladd, 2003, p.308)

This struck me very powerfully. As a deaf teenager in a hearing world, Lucas encounters disrupted stories and language. His access to completed narrative is denied in several respects. At school, he takes on huge amounts of extra work to fill in the gaps created by inadequate teaching methods. His early memories are locked in a language he doesn’t remember, and this compromises his ability to tell his own life story. This is represented, early in the novel, by his initial failure to produce
material for his ‘Life in the Day’ project. He seems to be without the tools to
describe his experiences.

In his early life, however, his confident use of sign language gave him a
creative means of understanding the world. In the extract below, taking my lead
from Ladd’s research, I had Lucas going to the cinema on behalf of his bed-bound
grandmother, and returning to sign his own ‘versions’ of film plots:

The plots always differed wildly from the version that Linda had seen, but her
mother didn’t seem to mind.

   Sitting on the edge of Daisy’s bed, Lucas signed:
   A boy drives a car into his dreams, where his mummy and daddy have
time to play with him and they don’t argue, and his mummy loves him
properly.

   That was Back to the Future. Lucas was a genius and a poet, turning his
hand into Marty McFly’s car when he signed, and sending it crashing (the
fingers spread across his forehead) into his mind.

   In her memory, Linda can see her mother’s fingers, trembling with
weakness, rising to ask Lucas for clarification. She can see Lucas walking
around her bed, his chest puffed-up like Biff, lost in a story which was better
than the real thing.

(The Electric, ch.5)

Lucas sees no deficit in his experience of the cinema, here, and creatively
exploits the apparent narrative disruption. It is at this point that the themes of
narrative, memory, cinemagoing and sign language first dovetailed. I will return to
this aspect of creative reading later in the chapter, with regards to Daisy.
The original inspiration for the character of Daisy came from reading an oral history article about 1930s police wives. Barbara Weinberger’s (1993) interviews revealed a group of women tethered to their husband’s profession, and I was drawn to descriptions of life on ‘Police Estates’, or ‘Colonies’, where wives entered into social and domestic competition, the stakes of which might be their husband’s career progression:

In Warwickshire, the Chief Constable would make an annual tour of inspection of police houses, to see that they were being kept up to the mark. Mrs Ellsworthy remembered how he would don a pair of white gloves and run his finger along the skirting board to see if it had been dusted.

(Weinberger, 1993, p. 50)

The wives of policemen were often subject to the same organisational structure as their husbands. Indeed, applicants for officer jobs were asked if they felt their wives would be ‘competent to uphold the standing and dignity of the rank’ (Weinberger, 1993, p.50). Up until the 1940s, brides of policemen were required to give up their employment, but often entered into unpaid labour for the force.

Life on police estates, as described by Malcolm Young (1984), was often deeply oppressive. According to the residents, talk on the estates revolved around ‘the interminable [subject] of who was doing well or who was doing badly’ (Young, 1984, p.76). Those wives living in the communities which their husbands policed found life just as hard, as shown by these remarks from a city police wife:
I could not leave my house for [the neighbours] shouting abuse at me and if they were near enough they spat on me. When I washed my steps… the children came and urinated on them – they also rubbed excreta on my doormat.

(Finch, 1983, p.40)

This idea of the ambivalent relationship between an individual and a community tightly contained by its geography is something I have written about before, in Blackmoor (Hogan, 2008) – the story of a woman with ocular albinism who lives in a former mining village. Fiction feeds on conflict, and Daisy’s situation seemed to have great potential, in that it might allow me to dramatise her struggle for independence in the face of great pressure.

In practice, the early drafts of Daisy’s section failed because she was unable to resist the claustrophobic nature of life as a police wife. In these initial attempts, Daisy was described, accurately, in feedback, as ‘a rather passive and reactive woman’, who is ‘irritating’ and somewhat ‘flat’ (Doloughan, 2014). In attempting to write about the oppression of women in a particular time and place in English history, I had actually oppressed my central female character. Part of the issue was a tentativeness in approaching historical material. I was trying to steer clear of writing about a 1940s character with a 2010s political consciousness, which can be jarring and patronising.

However, in researching what began as a minor detail of Daisy’s life – her frequent visits to the cinema – I found a surprising counter-culture with strong and vibrant features of resistance. The history of cinemagoing – which is often an oral history, or features the testimonies of its participants in other forms – is full of women who express an intellectual and critical response to their social and political
surroundings. Amongst its many influences on *The Electric*, both formal and in terms of content, this thread of early to mid-twentieth century history gave me a plausible basis for introducing elements of dissent and independence into Daisy’s character.

Cinemagoing of the 1930s and 40s – A Brief Introduction

In 1946, there were 1635 million cinema admissions in Britain (Corrigan, 1983, p.30) – a statistic worth reading twice. According to Box and Moss (quoted in Stacey, 1993, p.86), 70% of 1940s cinemagoers were working class, and many of them were women who reported attending up to four times per week.

There were many reasons for the popularity of cinema, but it is important to understand the relative physical luxury of the picturehouses of the time. I will write in further detail about Brighton’s cinemas, later in this chapter, but for now it suffices to say that the film-goers of the 1940s consistently contrasted the luxury of the cinema with the hardship and austerity of their lives. ‘Sometimes,’ as one respondent put it, ‘one went to keep warm if coal was short.’ (Stacey, 1993, p.94)

In a post-war Britain where families often had no electricity, plumbed-in baths, refrigerators or cars, the cinema was a cheap route to opulence: ‘For 1/9d we could enter another world. Oh the luxury of it, the red carpet, the wonderful portraits adorning the walls, the chandeliers hanging in the foyer and the smell!’ (Stacey, 1993, p. 95)

On first impression, one might say that the cinema was a place for these glamour-starved young women to dream. Indeed, ‘glamour’ and ‘romance’ are
words which consistently appear in the oral histories of cinemagoing. If many young cinemagoers of the time worked in light munitions, manufacturing, and clerical work – if they were forced into early adulthood by the war – it is understandable that they might seek refuge in escapism. However, as I soon found out, those women did not watch films passively – they were, in fact, deeply engaged viewers, both politically, and in the co-creation of meaning.

Through the retrospective oral histories of Annette Kuhn (2002) and Jackie Stacey, and particularly through J L Mayer’s (1948) *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* – in which young women wrote about their cinema experiences at the time – we can draw an illuminating and surprising portrait of Daisy’s generation of film fans. It was this portrayal that allowed me to add nuance and complexity to my characterisation of Daisy.

We find the following features foregrounded in the contributions of the young women: an obsessional – though not always conventionally ‘romantic’ – attachment to film stars, often expressed through fan-clubs and fashion; evidence of a complex and sometimes psychosexual engagement with films, in which the intersection of sex and violence often features; an intellectual and critical response to film as a cultural form, often encompassing a feminist resistance to on-screen portrayals of gender; a sense that films provoked, for the women, a dissatisfaction with their current predicament, leading sometimes to depression and sometimes to aspirational thinking; the influence of film on material choices, including those related to careers and relationships; and films engendering a ‘wakeful state’, giving the viewers a reflective tool for analysing the world. In the next section, I will cover each of those aspects, and explain how they contributed to my final conception of Daisy, before moving on to the formal influence of cinemagoing on the novel.
Falling for Stars

Jackie Stacey’s (1993) audience study, collected in *Star Gazing*, is built around the remembrances of older women looking back on their cinema-going youth. Many of them speak of an obsessional love for a particular film star – one fan claims she went to see Doris Day in *Calamity Jane* 88 times (I’ll explain how this was physically and financially possible in a later section). Fan clubs were common, and these organisations produced newsletters and other materials, and sometimes received correspondence from the actors themselves. Interestingly, the fan clubs did not disband after the peak of the star’s fame, or as the young fans passed through their adolescence. Consider the words of Pat Robinson, a respondent in *Star Gazing*, speaking in the 1990s of the longevity of the ‘Deanna Durbin Society’:

> [Durbin] keeps in touch with us. Our meetings and our newsletters bring us all such a great deal of pleasure. I feel it quite extraordinary that Deanna can inspire such devotion, as it is now forty years since she made a film or any kind of public appearance.

(Stacey, 1993, p.140)

By my calculations, Durbin was in her seventies at that point, and living in a farmhouse in France, having retired from public life after her last film in 1948. The enduring nature of the devotion already begins to indicate that the relationship between a cinemagoer of that time and a star could have some very particular and
surprising aspects. I tried to use the recorded documentation, here, as a model for the inner lives of Daisy and, in particular, Paul. In early drafts, I found it quite difficult to make the maintenance of his interest in Daisy plausible (he writes to her, from Canada, for several decades, with only irregular replies). But, in fact, we can see that the young film fans of the 1930s and 40s did not give up on the objects of their attention, simply because they got older. When Paul continues to write to her, despite the brevity of their meeting during the war, Daisy wonders:

What kind of man…writes to a married woman on another continent, whom he barely knows? It wasn’t so outrageous to Daisy, of course. In his obsession, she recognised an element of her own character. When he’d written that he wondered what she was doing every minute of the day, that he designed whole evenings with her, whole holidays, well, hadn’t she had the same fantasies about certain film stars? As a girl, Daisy had never thought it ridiculous to imagine herself going around with Deanna Durbin or Bing Crosby. They were human, like her – they just had more make-up. Love was a new thing – it came from Hollywood, and nobody could teach her to settle for less.

(The Electric, ch.4)

Hollywood may have provided a model for passion and romance, but it was a characteristically enduring passion, and quite an idiosyncratic form of romance. Hollywood stars provoked a range of feelings in the women who followed them, and whilst these included a – perhaps expected – romantic ‘swooning’, that was not the only response.

To return to Pat Robinson (because Daisy, too, was a Deanna Durbin fan), she describes in sensual detail the beginnings of her adoration for the actress:
When I was about nine or ten, I began to be aware of a young girl’s face appearing in magazines and newspapers. I was fascinated. The large eyes, the full mouth, sometimes the wonderful smile, showing the slightly prominent but perfect teeth.

(Stacey, 1993, p.139)

She goes on to describe a ‘love [that] was to last a lifetime…we watched as Deanna grew into a stunningly lovely woman.’ (Stacey, 1993, p.139)

But looking back, Robinson feels beholden to make reference to her sexuality when describing the many years she devoted to Durbin:

I think that it would be considered a bit of a giggle today, if a large number of women confessed to feeling love for a girl. Nobody seemed to question it then. Just in case: I have been married since 1948! I have two sons and a daughter, one grandchild.

(Stacey, 1993, p.140)

There’s an anxiety present, a slight bewilderment over where to put these feelings. Indeed, obsessional relationships with movie stars are difficult to categorise, and may be variously interpreted as sexual, Platonic, or aspirational.

The obsessions seem to be divided fairly equally between male and female stars. The women writing in J L Mayer’s (1948) British Cinemas and Their Audiences contributed their ‘film-watching biographies’ at the time of their peak cinema attendance. They had an awareness that their infatuation with certain stars didn’t quite fit within prescribed notions of desire. One fan, here, speaks of her feelings for Bing Crosby:
I think of him constantly; I wonder what his reactions are to certain news items… I wonder how his wife and kids are… I don’t pass out, but I feel completely limp when I hear him; relaxed and soothed… whether all that is love, I don’t know.

(Mayer, 1948, p.20)

The carefully considered, reflective language is fascinating, and one can see how it influenced my writing of Daisy. There is a physical reaction, but it is far from the highly-stimulated portrayal of the young fans of, say, Elvis Presley, who were said to have exposed themselves to the singer at his concerts. Crosby inspires in her a sense of deep calm, of security. Notice, too, how she mentally inquires after the welfare of his wife and family – there is no sense of identification with, jealousy of, or mean-spiritedness towards the spouse.

At that time, of course, the decision to marry had a huge effect on the direction of a woman’s life. As I found out in my research into police families, women were often ‘incorporated’ into unpaid police work, or forced to move town at short notice. Given the profound weight attached to real-life romantic decisions, perhaps some of the pleasure of star-worship was to be found in what Elizabeth Bowen described as the ‘inoperative love’ of fandom:

The delights of intimacy without the onus, high points of possession without the strain… Relationships in real life are made arduous by their reciprocities; one can too seldom sit back.’

(Bowen, 1937, p. 210)
In the relationship between Daisy and Paul, I tried to take a scenario with many of the facets of the star-gazer’s ‘inoperative love’, but then push it gradually into the ‘real lives’ of the two characters. Methodologically, then, Daisy is the product of a reciprocal process between the creative reading of non-fiction accounts, and the creative writing of a character embedded in a novel. Remarking on this process brings attention to the ‘levels of reality’ in The Electric: just as Daisy and Paul’s real life is influenced and disrupted by their film-viewing, so my fictional portrayal of them is heavily guided by reading about lived reality. I will return to this method of working, later in the commentary.

‘Scenes Both Bright and Sordid’: Sexuality and Cinemagoing

A deeper look at the hugely illuminating responses of the young women in Mayer’s collection of cinemagoing biographies reveals other, deeper elements to the relationship between romance and film-watching. The ‘inoperative love’ of fandom – with its newsletters and fashion influences – can sometimes seem passive – more of a wholesome admiration than a dark passion. These characteristics perhaps influenced the early drafts of Daisy. But as I explored the history of film attendance, I found that sex and the cinema were bound together in all sorts of complex and interesting ways.

It is well-known, perhaps, that the back-row seats of cinemas were armless, in order to facilitate the embraces of young couples. Jean Sheppard, responding to
Stacey (1993, p.86), said that ‘most of our courting was done in the pictures. It was the nearest thing to privacy any of us had in those days.’

Mayer’s subjects also reveal the way in which cinema experiences could free up powerful sexual alternatives. If there is something chaste about Pat Robinson’s description of a young Deanna Durbin, there is no such quality present in one young respondent’s reaction to a scene in Laurel and Hardy’s comic version of The Bohemian Girl, in which a gypsy girl is stripped, lashed to a post, and whipped:

That scene stimulated me a great deal and I would enact over and over again in the privacy of my own bedroom any scenes like that…of course I usually altered it so that I was not saved so promptly.

(Mayer, 1948, p. 89)

This brilliant and very thinly-veiled description of sadomasochistic sexual practice is followed by the usual disclaimer – ‘Perhaps I had better add that my ‘private life’ is quite normal. I have been engaged since I was twenty, my fiancé being overseas most of the time’ – but the freedom of the admission is notable. These are the words of someone who is conscious of, and able to articulate, her own desires and sexual psychology. Such open descriptions of sexuality helped me to push Daisy away from more tentative (and perhaps patronising) early portrayals.

In fact, as I continued to draft the novel, my eagerness to display the ‘two sides’ of cinemagoing sexuality – the diligent, virginal fan, and the violently aroused voyeur – came out in quite an undigested manner. For several drafts, Daisy’s earliest appearance was as a girl participating in a film-inspired game of Cowboys and Indians:
Daisy had already taken out her treasured old bootlace, and was organising the loops as her cousin had shown her. At home, she could pull it all tight with her teeth, but she wasn’t about to waste the opportunity to have someone else do it. ‘Tie us to the railings,’ she said. ‘Come on. It’s part of the story.’

William Hervey helped her to get fixed up to the black iron spikes outside the solicitor’s office. In return, she called him Wild Bill in a whisper, and then said, all business, ‘Imagine there’s a fire burning at my feet.’

William looked at her wrists, thoughtfully. ‘You want to be careful. You’ll cut yourself.’

Daisy rolled her eyes…She was better at creating the scene alone in her room. Out on the street, the loops were too loose, and the cowboys always arrived too early.

In her relationships, in these early drafts, the adult Daisy walked the line between S&M and exploitation with her husband Robert, while enjoying an unconsummated relationship with Paul, who – at that point in the drafting process – suffered from a longstanding injury which made penetrative sex impossible.

Unsatisfactory as they are, with their broad strokes, such drafts can be useful in boldly marking themes, which can be rewritten with greater subtlety, later.

To return to the twenty-two year-old medical student who described her reaction to The Bohemian Girl, we can also see how she uses her film-watching biography to trace her psychological history from childhood. She speaks of how she ‘detested’ the otherwise popular Shirley Temple, who was held up by her parents as a paragon of good behaviour. ‘She was always so good – seeing her in films was a continual reproach to me about my own naughtiness.’ The respondent instead held a preference for ‘Jane Withers as the bad girl in Bright Eyes’ whom she describes as ‘no stuffed ninny.’ (Mayer, 1948, p.88)

Interestingly, the respondent credits Deanna Durbin (‘My Deanna’) as curbing her temper. So, not only do we see film being used as a reflective tool, here, for
recognising, analysing, and correcting character traits, we also get the first hints of how it retrospectively narrativises the lives of the women. This respondent uses identification with certain stars to show how she ‘began’ as Jane Withers, and ‘became’ Deanna Durbin.

Back in the sphere of sexuality and romance, then, we’ve seen how an obsession with film could provoke both the ‘soothing’ adoration characteristic of ‘inoperative love’, or tap into the more violent and visceral elements of sex. Compare the earlier respondent’s description of Bing Crosby’s family life, with this, from an 18 year-old bank clerk: ‘I simply revelled in seeing bold bad men, and I was extremely annoyed when Rhett Butler softened with his baby daughter.’ (Mayer, 1948, p.73)

Indeed, it's interesting to note how many of the women betray a preference for gangster films, horror, and thrillers. A twenty-two year-old clerk identified with the more violent side of the cinema programme. ‘I often found myself longing to be part of those stories, to take part in the most blood-curdling adventures.’ (Mayer, 1948, p. 82)

When we hold these predilections up against the qualities required to be a good police wife – the woman of ‘good character’, who provides a ‘clean, comfortable home’ (Williams, 1914) – we see a possible tension, ripe for exploration in fiction. With this research undertaken, I felt more comfortable in generating Daisy’s scenes of dissent. We can again see, here, how an engagement with sources across different disciplines can have practical implications for the fiction writer. In this case, my imaginative rewrite of Daisy inhabited a gap between two sources.

The result of this ‘synthesising’ of sources is evident in the redrafting of certain scenes of direct conflict between Daisy and Robert. In my original versions
of the scene in which Robert interrogates Daisy about her whereabouts, the exchange ends weakly, as Daisy placates Robert with sex, having apparently enjoyed his abusive behaviour. In the final version, Daisy’s insistence that she ‘can’t help being smart’ instead turns the scene in her favour, and she causes Robert to reflect on the changes in his personality.

As well as the more obvious situations of conflict with Robert, Daisy is more active in the correspondence with Paul in later drafts. She decides to write to him, and dictates the terms of their affair. At times it seemed that these decisions were taken with the words of Mayer’s respondents ringing in my ears.

Learning Spanish from Zorro: The Material and Intellectual Influence of Film

From the various testimonies of cinemagoers of the period, we can see the range of subjects they enjoyed in the dark of the auditorium. But there is some evidence, too, of how the voracious consumption of films impacted their lives in both a material and intellectual way.

For example, whilst Hollywood is often credited with having influenced the popular conception of romance, being exposed to the heightened passions of the big screen could often generate a certain amount of comparative dissatisfaction in real life relationships.
'I have finished some really very pleasant friendships,’ said one woman, ‘because of this intangible longing for something different; something based, I suppose, on the very early idea of love.’ (Mayer, 1948, p.84)

And this dissatisfaction was not restricted to the romantic sphere. Many of the women who regularly attended the cinema were working class, and it’s clear that exposure to the glamour of Hollywood could cause restlessness. One respondent, a 17-year-old typist, states it plainly when she says that she became ‘rather dissatisfied with my present existence and the neighbourhood in which I live.’ Films, she said, made her ‘discontented with being poor.’ (Mayer, 1948, p.55)

There is, of course, a more positive way of viewing this – as an awareness of broader horizons. One of the surprises, in my reading, was the concrete effects that cinema had on the lives and choices of the women who regularly watched films. With dissatisfaction comes a desire for change, and aspiration is born. This is clearly evident in the thirst of the cinemagoers for glamorous fashions, from the ‘spotted muslin party dress’ worn by Shirley Temple to the ‘half-hats…and low-heeled court shoes’ of Doris Day (Stacey, 1993, p.168). Deanna Durbin is often said to have created the sub-genre of teenage fashion – ‘the first major Hollywood player to wear outfits designed with girls of her own age in mind.’ (Kuhn, 2002, p. 114) But the influence of film went beyond the important aspect of signalling identity through the outward appearance. What is striking from the cinema biographies is the number of times young women write of films influencing their material life choices, especially in terms of vocation. One trainee nurse cites The Lamp Still Burns as propelling her towards her career. In fact, that film is credited more than once with awakening an early interest in nursing (marriages between nurses and police constables were, incidentally, very common). Also in Mayer (1948, p. 84), a 22 year-old clerk says
that seeing Tyrone Power in *The Mask of Zorro* inspired her to learn Spanish, which in turn led to a career in the travel industry. The influence, there, is stark and direct.

However, perhaps the most striking ways in which cinemagoing influenced the women in Mayer’s book, are connected to the more ephemeral spheres of politics and worldview. The way that some of the women wrote about films shows that they considered the medium seriously and critically. One respondent, at only 19 years old, gives a damning verdict on *Elizabeth and Essex*, which, she believes, pandered to gender norms. To foreground Elizabeth I’s romantic interests, she says, was ‘Nonsense! Elizabeth loved only herself; she may have liked lovers to satisfy her vanity but she would have sacrificed everything she loved for the throne and power.’ (Mayer, 1948, p. 68)

This sort of engagement with film – politicised, analytical, and feminist – is far removed from the idea of 1940s cinemagoing as light escapism. The same young woman also rounds on *The Prime Minister*, a biopic of Benjamin Disraeli, which she felt contained an inaccurate portrayal of the politician’s wife. We can see, from her comments below, that she is subtle, insightful and consistent in her concerns:

Why misrepresent it? The beauty of the fact that Disraeli could say that Mary Anne was the perfect wife lay not in the fact that she was a frivolous, flirtatious, romantic young girl, but that she was almost fifty and twelve years older than he was.

(Mayer, 1948, p. 69)

Such a review is extremely helpful to a fiction writer portraying a woman of that era. A writer could easily take the dominant source – in this case, *The Prime Minister* (1941) – as a guide to marital relationships of the period. As I’ve said,
accounts like that of the young respondent above allowed me to plausibly imbue Daisy with a sense of resistance, and dissent, however subdued in the early part of the novel. She became a more liberated and textured character as a result of my reading.

There is a sense, here, in which Daisy’s cinemagoing gives her a consciousness of her predicament. David Foster Wallace (1997) believed that watching serious films ‘renders us more “conscious”’, and that phenomenon is very much present in the writings of the young women in Mayer. A twenty-one year-old chemist’s assistant, who penned long letters after her cinema visits, puts it well, by way of a conclusion: ‘In my opinion, the world is half asleep,’ she writes (Mayer, 1948, p. 80). Films and cinemagoing, were, for me, a way of waking Daisy.

The Language of Film

What we see throughout the history of cinemagoing is people responding to film almost like a second cultural language – as a tool for analysing, reading, and encoding their own lives. This is something we see in reactions to literary works of fiction, too. Jonathan Franzen (1996) quotes the linguistic anthropologist, Shirley Brice Heath, who said that regular readers of ‘substantive works of fiction’ saw novels as ‘the only places where there was some civic, public hope of coming to grips with the ethical, philosophical and socio-political dimensions of life that were elsewhere treated so simplistically.’ (Franzen, 1996, p.49)

Regarding film, the reaching for alternatives could sometimes take quite a literal form. One Hollywood-obsessed woman said, ‘I always talk to myself in an American accent, and often think that way too.’ (Mayer, 1948. p20) But that same
respondent also has a very particular, cinema-influenced way of reading domestic space:

> When I am alone in a house, I always see to it that I sit in an advantageous position for dealing with prowlers, murderers, ghosts and other intruders: facing a door, or mirror, with some sort of weapon handy, such as a poker.

(Mayer, 1948. p.20)

This is not just a way of using film to work through hypothetical situations, or trying out possible real-life scenarios; this is a whole other way of *seeing* the world. This is someone thinking in ‘shots’, re-making the spaces of her life in camera angles and sightlines. There is a strong parallel, here, with Lucas’ journey in *The Electric*, and how the spatial language of BSL helped him to gain a greater control over his environment. He speaks of a new clarity of vision when he begins, with Cassie, to relearn BSL:

> Since they met, the world has looked different to him, sharper. It reminds him of when they first replaced their VHS with a DVD player. Objects bloom out of the blur.

(*The Electric*, ch.7)

This sense of a language encoding space is reminiscent of Terry Kit-fong-Au’s question, in chapter one, about the extent to which a second language creates a worldview. Here, we are moving away from the influence of the *content* of films on cinemagoers, towards issues of form. What does it mean to think in the narrative language of film? How good is that language as a method for translating and organising real life experiences? And what happens when the narrative language of
film is disrupted? In the next section, I will explain how cinemagoing history, with its many examples of disjuncture, influenced the formal choices I made when writing *The Electric*.

**Part Three: Reels and Loops – How Cinemagoing shaped *The Electric***

In the previous section, I showed how – on a straightforward level – the history of cinemagoing allowed me to see a way of providing narrative ‘alternatives’ for Daisy, a character whom history might consider to have been oppressed. It provided examples of how cinemagoing women of her generation might have broadened the scope of their lives, and resisted the limitations of traditional gender roles. In short, cinemagoing history gave me access to Daisy’s *interiority*, a vital aspect of her character development. Alongside this, a closer look at the actual *experience* of going to the cinema throughout the early and middle part of the twentieth century revealed some interesting ways in which cinemagoers dealt with and exploited narrative interference. These disturbances, some of which I will describe in detail throughout this section, include: censorship, mechanical failure, the oddities of the rolling programme, and the intrusion of ‘real life’ into the cinema space. They all fed into the central concerns of my novel, particularly the essential question: how can we use narrative to make sense of our lives, when it is often so heavily disrupted?

This is a question which has some obvious overlaps with the themes of Lucas’ narrative strand. Like Lucas in his life amongst the hearing, Daisy, as a cinemagoer, faced omissions and interruptions. Film plots, as I will explain, came to her in
fragments, sometimes oddly removed from their context. This section looks at how that influenced the form of the novel, and how she and Lucas learn to exert some agency over the disruption.

Out of Order: the Effects of Rolling Programmes

The modern cinemagoer typically buys a ticket for a single screening of one film. They arrive shortly before the feature begins, and – if it is sufficiently entertaining – they leave when it ends. Up until the 1960s, this was not the case. Before then, films were shown on a ‘rolling programme’ – a repeated loop of news reels, short films, and a major feature, rounded off by the national anthem. The viewer purchased a ticket for a seat rather than a screening. They turned up whenever they saw fit, and left when they liked. Theoretically, they could watch the full programme multiple times on one admittance. If we think back to the Doris Day fan who claimed to have watched Calamity Jane 88 times, we can probably assume that this was possible because she saw the film several times per daily sitting. The rolling programme also meant that an audience member might enter the auditorium in the middle of a film, watch the ending first, and then eventually catch up with its opening when the programme rolled around again. This situation led to a radically different way of watching and understanding film narratives.
In his short essay, ‘A Cinema-goer’s Autobiography’, Italo Calvino (1990, p.40) writes with great beauty about his youth in the 1930s, when he attended the cinema ‘maybe even twice a day.’ He gives perhaps the most lucid account of the effects of the rolling programme. His description of the strange joy of narrative disruption deserves to be quoted at length:

Watching the beginning of the film after one had already seen the end offered additional pleasures: that of discovering not the resolution of the film’s mysteries and dramas but their genesis; and that of a confused sense of premonition vis-à-vis the characters. Confused: in precisely the way a clairvoyant’s must be, since the reconstruction of the mangled plot was not always easy, and would be even less so if it happened to be a detective story, where the identification first of the murderer and then of the crime left an even murkier area of mystery in the middle. What’s more, there would sometimes be a bit missing between the beginning and the end, since suddenly looking at my watch I’d realise I was late and that if I didn’t want to incur my parents’ wrath I’d have to leave before the sequence I’d come in at reappeared on the screen. So that many films were left with a hole in the middle, and even today, after thirty years – what am I saying? – almost forty, when I find myself watching one of those old films – on television for example – I’ll recognise the moment I walked into the cinema, the scenes I watched without understanding, and I’ll retrieve the lost pieces and complete the puzzle as if I’d left it unfinished only the day before.

(Calvino, 1990, p.40-41)

Daisy herself has this same film experience when she first meets Paul Landry during a screening of *Casablanca.* She enters the auditorium in time to see the film’s denouement first, and finds it confusing and unremarkable. As the film begins again, she is distracted by Paul interpreting the film into French for his colleague (another disruption). During the quiet middle of the film, Daisy begins to understand the climax, and is emotionally overwhelmed by the cascading realisations she has.
The ending caught up with her halfway through the film. The deepest part of her mind must have made the connection between the events unfolding on screen, and the conclusion she’d seen over an hour earlier. It hit her with force, and she began to cry, quietly.

(The Electric, ch.4)

This portrayal of strange temporal sequencing was what I intended to mimic in the narrative ordering of The Electric. The way the time of Daisy’s life is presented replicates the looped programme, beginning after her death (with Linda’s discovery of the letters), and then vaulting back to the 1930s, and the early days of her marriage, in chapter two. After that, the two time frames proceed, in opposite temporal directions, towards the ‘hole in the middle’, which is her death. The task of piecing the narrative together is undertaken unwittingly by Lucas through the intrusive memories provoked by his relearning of sign language, and more proactively by Linda, who attempts to reread her mother’s life by tracking down Paul Landry. Both Lucas and Linda are learning to read a life in the way Daisy watched films. This narrative form seemed apt to how memory works, and how we are constantly reviewing and reorganising the past in light of new understandings. Linda’s experience of grief is reminiscent of the brief but important Casablanca scene: initially following her mother’s death, Linda is emotionally paralysed. It is only when she returns to the middle of her mother’s life, and makes the discovery about Paul Landry, that she is able to review the events surrounding her mother’s death with new emotional understanding.
Outside Intrusions

Calvino also writes poetically about the difficult spatial duality of the cinema. Just as there are (at least) two time frames for the cinemagoer – the couple of hours in which they sit before the screen, and the (typically compressed, and potentially disrupted) diegetic time of the film – there are also at least two spaces.

When it rained in the film, I would listen hard to hear whether it had started raining outside too, whether I had been surprised by a downpour, having left home without an umbrella: it was the only moment when, while still immersed in that other world, I remembered the world outside; and it made me anxious. Even today, rain in films triggers the same reaction, a sense of anxiety.

(Calvino, 1990, p.42)

The oral history of cinemagoing is full of such synchronicity and divergence between the space of the cinema, and the space of the film. In Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing (Breakwell and Hammond, 1990), there are many examples. One contributor relates an anecdote in which a bird got into the auditorium during a showing of The Birds, where it was duly killed by a screaming woman – a tale which seems a little too ‘on the nose’ for fiction. During war-time, one can imagine the existential adjustments required when fictional war films were preceded by newsreels of actual war events. Indeed, one cinemagoer slips between associations, here:

The Twentieth Century Fox logo always made me think we were about to see a war film, as the searchlights that had woken us in London in the blitz always preceded an air raid.
On the surface, that seems like a simple comparison, but it is fascinating to look closely at the levels of deferral there: the searchlights of the *logo* remind the viewer of the *real* searchlights of the blitz, and this triggers the expectation that he will see a *fictional* war film.

Narrative disruption could also be caused by the perfectly mundane intrusion of real-life, as in this response from a projectionist:

‘People would ring up and say, “Can you get Mrs So-and-So, her baby’s crying and I can’t stop her.” So you’d write a carbon-backed slide with this message and project it over the film. And then you’d hear scurrying feet in the cinema.’

(Breakwell and Hammond, 1990, p. 53)

So, domestic realities could intrude, in quite a literal way, into the fantasy, adventure, and romance of the fictional world.

The cinema is a liminal space between fantasy and reality, the conscious and unconscious mind. It’s an uncanny place. Calvino (1990, p. 44) describes ‘the colour of the air outside’ appearing ‘discreetly at the threshold’ after a film had finished, and how cinemagoers would look at each other uneasily, ‘as though facing an intrusion equally inconvenient to both.’

Some film-makers have made a subject of the thin membrane between the fantasy of cinema, and real-life. David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is a film in two parts. A traditional reading is that the first section of the film is a wishful Hollywood-inspired fantasy occurring in the mind of Dianne during the moment of her suicidal death. Perhaps one of the most striking scenes takes place in a film studio, when Betty – the happy-go-lucky fictional alter-ego of depressed Dianne –
seems to realise, or remember, that this is not her true existence, that her ‘reality’ is elsewhere, and much worse. It is an existentially terrifying moment which – crucially – can only be truly appreciated on second viewing.

This mixing up of fantasy, memory, reality, and fiction, runs deep through the history of cinemagoing. We have seen, in the responses of Mayer’s cinemagoers, that the language of film – its tropes, its fashions, and the particular way in which it sees and orders the world – can influence an individual’s perception of reality.

When we engage deeply with a fictional narrative form, its shape influences the way we tell the stories of our lives. Some fictional content can slip through alongside the fictional form. The line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred. *Mulholland Drive* is ostensibly about wishful thinking, but a look at the testimonies of victims of trauma reveals that the influence of film can go much deeper.

In his book *The Remembered Film* (2010), Victor Burgin outlines an oral history project about memory undertaken in Provence, in which sociologists ‘found an almost universal tendency for personal history to be mixed with recollections of scenes from films… ‘I saw at the cinema’ would become simply, “I saw”’ (2010, p.67). Burgin picks out one striking example:

A woman speaks of her experiences as a child amongst refugees making the hazardous journey from the north of France down to Marseille. She recalls the several occasions when the column of refugees in which she was travelling were strafed by German aircraft. In recounting these memories she invokes a scene from René Clement’s film of 1952, *Jeux Interdits*, in which a small girl in a column of refugees survives an air attack in which her parents are killed. The woman’s speech, however, shifts between the first and third person in such a way that it is unclear whether she is speaking of herself or of the character in the film.

(Burgin, 2010, p. 68)
I will look closer at trauma in chapter three, but for now we can see, in the case above, how fictional film scenes fill the space left by a repressed memory. There is clearly ‘narrative disruption’ here, but the relationship between film, reality, and memory is so convoluted that it’s hard to say which way the disruption runs. It was, in fact, this sort of disruption and convolution that I wanted to explore in my fiction: Lucas remembers his grandmother in a visuo-spatial language which has technical parallels with film; Daisy seeks the sustenance of film’s fantasy life to resist the difficulties of her domestic situation, and her life eventually resembles the romances she enjoys; Lucas – denied access to film dialogue, simply invents his own versions of the plot; and when Daisy’s cinema experience is disrupted by the peculiarities of the rolling programme, she finds joy and liberation in the re-ordering of the story.

Calvino (1990, p. 45), when writing of the glitzy fantasy of Hollywood film, said that he ‘never took it as truth, but just as one of the many artificial images possible.’ Cinema (and fiction) is not about a moral distinction between the evil untruths of fantasy and the righteousness of reality; it is about providing a space for alternatives. It is a chance to have both. As the relearning of sign language gives Lucas an alternative way of apprehending the world – a way to be both Deaf and hearing – so cinemagoing gives Daisy – like the real women on whom she is based – ways to resist the iniquities of her domestic life, without abandoning it. Some of those possibilities for cinema-going women were quite tangible – fashion ideas, the motivation to pursue a career or learn a language. Some of them were intellectual – cinema offered an engagement with an often complex cultural form. Some of the possibilities were deeper and more ephemeral – such as the opening up of sexual
fantasies and romantic alternatives. Whilst these may seem, on the surface, to have offered less material change, my fictional representation of Daisy suggests that fantasy can often have a very real effect on life choices.

We often, perhaps, think of narrative disruption as a negative element of the reading/viewing/listening experience. We assume that disruption is experienced passively, and causes only frustration. A modern film audience may find it unsatisfactory to miss the beginning of a film, or see it in the wrong order, just as a hearing audience might find seeing a film without the sound to be disappointing. But for Daisy and Lucas in *The Electric*, these disruptions become an opportunity for creative engagement. Both characters learn to master – to a certain extent – the skills required to manipulate and control the disruptions in narrative, in films, in language, in memory, and in real life. The breakdown in narrative allows both characters to exercise a certain agency over the stories they consume, and they then take this power into their own lives to resist stereotypes, and change their stories.

**The Site of the Picture Palace**

As I mentioned in earlier sections, much of the appeal of cinemagoing, for the researcher as well as the respondent, lies in the magnificence of the cinema buildings. In oral histories, one observes a move away from statistical, sociological approaches, and towards remembered sensual details, which is just the sort of access
that a fiction writer needs. One oral history respondent gives an almost
impressionistic description of the Brighton cinemas of her youth:

On Wednesday afternoons, my father’s half day, in the winter, we always went
to the pictures. In the Regent, they had budgerigars all alongside in a wire
enclosure. We also had tea and toast on a tray, which must have been really
dangerous as we had to pass the trays of tea along rows of people.

(Riley, Payne, and Flood, 2009, p. 59),

Pictures and reminiscences from the 1930s and 1940s give a sense of spaces
which were suitably ornamented for the production of fantasy. I have included
photographs of the interiors and exteriors, in the appendix.

After authoring two novels rooted very much in the twenty-five year
experience of living in my home county of Derbyshire, The Electric is the first
literary novel I have written about Brighton and Sussex, where I have lived since
2008. That situation presented many challenges. A fiction writer can’t hope to
encapsulate a whole city and its history in one novel. By focusing on the cinemas, I
had a way of dividing the space of the city, and its past, into manageable areas.

As the two maps I created below illustrate, the rapid demise of cinemagoing as
the premier form of popular entertainment naturally led to the closing of many of
Brighton and Hove’s cinemas. The years between 1950 and 1958, saw a drop off of
641 million cinema attendances in Britain, and the consequent closure of many
venues. As the maps show, there were 13 cinemas in the city in 1946 and by 1986
there were only three.
Brighton cinemas, 1946 (above)

Brighton cinemas 1986

Focusing on the sites enabled me to read the history of the city compressed into the buildings themselves. I could trace the history of a cinema from its inception, through its various names and guises, through its modernisation and
disrepair, to its closure or repurposing. I could also sometimes see the building today, often in a new form.

For example, the site of the Odeon Kemptown on the corner of St George’s Road and Paston Place was originally owned by the Sassoon family, who kept stables there. In September 1940 the cinema was struck by a bomb from a German plane pursued by Spitfires and attempting to lighten its load in order to hasten the retreat. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the cinema was running its regular ‘Mickey Mouse Club’, and several children were amongst the dead. The defiant atmosphere of the time meant that the Odeon was rebuilt within three months. By 1980 it was a bingo hall, and in ’83 became a social welfare centre run by the Bethany Fellowship, before being demolished to make way for flats, as Kemptown became the affluent liberal centre it is now. This compression of decades into the space of the site is just one more way in which we can witness the uncanny behaviour of time in the cinema, and in the novel.

Again, there is a parallel with Lucas, here, in the spatialization of time. In the previous chapter, I addressed the idea of simultaneity in sign language – the way in which narrative suspense is somewhat flattened. Lucas notes this towards the end of the novel. In sign language, he explains:

You don’t wait for the next word, for what comes next, because it’s already happening. Your right hand is a falling tree (your puffed cheeks tell of its size), and your left hand is the man who stands beneath it. It all happens before your very eyes, inevitable.

*(The Electric*, ch.18)*

The same principle holds when you consider the sites of the Brighton cinemas within the novel. In this multi-generational book, all of the layers of a building’s
history are simultaneously present. They tell a story of how British people spent their leisure time through the eras. Sharp-eyed patrons of the Academy Cinema could spot the Moorish designs that harked back to the building’s time as a Turkish baths called ‘The Brighton Hammam’ (Riley, Payne, and Flood, 2009). The Savoy, too, had been a bath-house, and several of the cinemas became bingo halls when the movie craze passed.

When visiting the old cinema buildings, I found myself struck by the physical clues about their pasts. The Savoy, on which The Electric is loosely based, still has its seafront entrance. I collected some of the tiles which dropped from its tired façade after a recent storm. The foyer now leads into a casino. On the East Street side, the building is home to a strip club.

I was moved to read a former employee’s description of the cinema’s final years:

It was a lovely old building. It had gone to rot, though. The main ballroom upstairs was still there, but the ceiling had partially collapsed and it was inhabited by pigeons. The huge number one screen had been closed for years, but the beautiful old silk curtains, enormous amounts of fabric, slightly tattered, were still hanging there. I remember thinking what a terrible waste it was.

(Riley, Payne, Flood, 2009, p.68)

I wanted to get some of that sense of compression, simultaneity, and the fetishization of the buildings that I found in the oral histories, into the finale of Daisy and Paul’s strand. In order to do that, I changed the narrative pace, and the decades leading up to Daisy’s death are summarised around the closures:
The West Street Odeon shut in 1973, along with the Regent. Daisy told Paul that one of her first memories was the sight of a German fighter plane positioned as if crashing into the canopy, as part of the promotion for a Jean Harlow film. She told him about the budgerigars in the foyer and the shining steel teapots, how she’d danced on the sprung-floor of the ballroom upstairs.

That same year, they stood on the same street, an arm’s length between them, and watched the Academy pulled apart, layer by layer. It was where they had first made love. The crumbling art deco interior gave way to the Moorish flourishes of the old Victorian days. They thought they recognised the basement, although the foundations were swampy and overtaken with green slime.

‘Eventually,’ Paul said, ‘we’re going to have to find something else to do with our time.’

‘Not until they pull the last one down,’ Daisy said. ‘They’ll have to drag me out of my seat.

The Astoria was a bingo hall by the time Linda married Mike, in ’77. The Curzon became a Waitrose, and later Daisy and Paul went there to run their hands across the dessert freezers, where they had once sat, shoulder to shoulder in the dark.

At the Granada, they watched a bizarre showing of Planet of the Apes, where the projectionist had mixed up the reels so that the ending’s grand reveal came twenty minutes in. The Vogue, which had once been the Gaiety, had its top floor sliced off, and then, just before Lucas was born, became a Sainsbury’s.

Daisy had always worried that they might run out of time, but in the end they were running out of space.

(The Electric, ch.14)

The closure of the cinemas throughout the 60s, 70s and 1980s are a threat to Daisy and Paul’s affair, and to the spirit which made it possible. As well as literally compromising their ability to meet by restricting their choice of safe venues, the closures figuratively mirror the demise of the cinema-inspired ‘fantasy’ romance that they brought into being.

In another sense, the compression of time represented by the cinema buildings – and also present in the temporal operation of sign language – powers a feeling of simultaneity which is so often present in the testimonies of trauma sufferers. For
Lucas and Linda, the pain of Daisy’s death does not steadily recede as the decades pass. It keeps bursting forth. It is part of their present existence, and nowhere is that more apparent – especially for Linda – than in the cinema. Indeed, the experience of walking into a cinema compresses time for Linda in a way that, for much of the novel, she is unable to endure.

In the next chapter, I will examine how Linda’s experience of trauma and time also influenced the narrative arrangement of the novel. Like the rolling programmes of the cinema, and the spatial privileging of sign language, trauma disrupts and warps narrative time, and Linda – like her relatives – must learn to manipulate and control the disjunctures.
Chapter Three: Representing Remembered Trauma in Fiction

The Electric is a novel with a traumatic event at its centre. Daisy’s violent death has a profound effect on Linda and Lucas, especially in terms of their ability to remember her. In the introduction to this commentary, I stated that my novel has a preoccupation with ‘the construction of the real within the individual’s consciousness.’ (Lodge, 2003, p.49) It might be more accurate, however, to modify Lodge’s quote slightly, and say that The Electric explores the construction of the past in consciousness, particularly when that past is traumatic.

In this chapter, I will discuss my process in attempting to find a language and a form adequate to the representation of remembered trauma. In trying to understand traumatic memory, and its narrative representation, I once again took a cross-disciplinary approach, consulting sources from psychology, psychoanalysis, contemporary fiction, and narrative studies, as I will describe below.

In terms of writing practice, the search for an apt representational form also involved a good deal of experimentation in the early drafts of the novel, particularly regarding Linda’s sections. I will present some of these experiments, and refer to some of the literary influences on the fragmentary, epigrammatic early drafts of Linda’s narrative. This chapter will also confront some of the reasons why Linda’s sections became more conventional throughout the drafting process.
The concept of remembered trauma had an impact on several ‘levels’ of the book. On the most basic level, the aim of my research was to improve the psychological accuracy of my representations of Linda and Lucas – two characters who are suffering with the effects of trauma on memory.

Taking one step back from that, I was also describing the process of how my characters struggle to turn trauma into language. Van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995, p.167) suggest that, in order for an individual to cope with trauma, the ‘mute, unsymbolized, and unintegrated experiences’ must be moved from the realm of ‘speechless terror’, and be instead ‘organised on a linguistic level.’ It seemed important that my structural choices bore the trace of that difficult task: I wanted the experience of reading *The Electric* to mirror the struggle of articulating traumatic memory.

On yet another level, researching traumatic memory caused me to reflect on the representational limits of my fiction – the fundamental problems a novelist has when trying to bring language and memory/reality together. Here, I will describe some of the ways in which my novel perhaps acknowledges the imperfection of prose narrative as a representative tool.

Unable to Remember, Unable to Forget

Freud defined trauma as ‘an event which overwhelms mental processes by being too sudden or extreme for [the individual] to accommodate and process, [and] this must
result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which energy operates’ (Freud in Garland, 1998, p.155). We can certainly say that Lucas suffered a trauma on finding the bodies of his grandparents, following the shooting. It might be argued that Linda, who experienced the event at one remove, is suffering from unprocessed grief, rather than trauma, but what I am concerned with, in this chapter, is their different ways of remembering the event.

In her paper ‘Where the Lights and Shadows Fall’, Ignês Sodré (2014, p. 184) studies both the inability to remember and the inability to forget, two phenomena which she identifies as belonging to ‘the same area of the psychopathology of memory.’

The first reaction, she characterises as a ‘lack of “illumination” in the conscious mind – a regression to a memory-less state of almost complete darkness, of being psychically reduced to the narrow beam of a candlelight.’ (Sodré, 2014, p.184) One might think of Lucas as having this response to trauma. In fact, Sodré, in quoting George Eliot’s Silas Marner, could be describing Lucas’ predicament at the beginning of the novel:

[A] Lethean influence of exile, in which the past has become dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked to no memories.

(Eliot, quoted in Sodré, 2014, p.184)

Whilst Lucas’ repression of his grandmother’s death is more complete than Silas’ ‘minimal, half-dead’ retrieval, it is true that Lucas’ ‘symbols have all vanished’ in an almost literal sense, in that he has lost the language in which he conducted his relationship with his grandmother.
Sodré defines the second response to traumatic memory as follows:

The emotional inability to forget…the problem of an excessive ‘illumination’ of particular events in the mind which compulsively steal the limelight…Excessive fear, excessive grief, or an excessive sense of grievance create situations where ordinary forgetting cannot take place.

(Sodré, 2014, p. 184)

Although Linda is unable to forget, she certainly does a very good job, in the early part of the novel, of denying her compulsive memories. When the illumination of her mother’s death is excessive, Linda’s response, as the book opens, is to put on the metaphorical sunglasses. But she certainly suffers from excessive fear and excessive grief; her mother’s death, and her attempt to shut it out, has come to dominate her life, plunging her into inertia.

My purpose, in this chapter, is not to show how my fictional characters are exemplars of any particular theoretical definitions – they are not. But this idea of Lucas and Linda as suffering from different issues regarding the ability to remember and forget was useful to me, as I reached the later drafts. What they share, in their disjunctures of memory, is ‘an inability to remember in a way which connects the experience of ‘now’ in a meaningful way to who I am and was.’ (Sodré, 2014, p.185) This connection, of course, is a question of narrative. If ‘one’s sense of identity is dependent on one’s autobiographical self’ (Sodré, 2014, p. 185), then that suggests a broadly coherent narrative path between past and present. Neither Lucas nor Linda has straightforward access to such a path, and that had repercussions on the narrative
choices I made when representing their predicaments. In the sections below, I will take Lucas and Linda separately, and describe my attempts to find apt forms to address their ways of remembering.

Lucas: Amnesia and Repetition

Language, trauma, and narrative connect in so many ways, and my reading on these subjects strengthened my conviction about the importance of Lucas’ lost signs. In discussing memory and trauma, Antze and Lambek (1996, pxiii) suggest that the ‘dissolution of the social milieu’ throughout the twentieth century, has left us with ‘only one fixed point of reference, the lieu, or site provided by our own bodies.’ Trauma becomes corporeal, and what better representation of that than the eruption of a long-dormant manual language, a language of the body? But the task of representing the rising up of long-buried memories was a difficult one.

The history of repressed memory, and what Freud called ‘the repetition compulsion’ (1914), is full of shocking cases of memories which are reexperienced without modification. Pierre Janet was one of the early pioneers in the field of traumatic memory (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995). One of his patients, a young woman known as Irene, had diligently cared for her sick mother until her death. When she met Janet, Irene suffered from two distinct symptoms. Firstly, she had no conscious memory of the death of her mother. She accepted that she was dead only equivocally, because others told her it was so. Despite being present when
her mother died, and present at the funeral (where she laughed inappropriately),
Irene could recall neither occasion.

The second symptom was just as striking:

Several times a week, the following scene took place: whenever Irene looked from a certain direction to an empty bed, she took on a bizarre posture. She stared at the bed, without moving her eyes, she did not hear anybody anymore…and she began to engage in stereotyped activities. She brought a glass to the lips of an imaginary person, she cleaned her mouth, she talked with this person…she climbed on the bed in order to arrange the body…This reproduction lasted three or four hours. It ended usually by the patient looking desperate, by a convulsion, and, finally, by sleep. Irene had meticulously reproduced all the details of her mother’s death.

(Van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995, p. 162)

Consciously, she could remember nothing of the night her mother died, yet her repetition of the sequence of events (which had happened, in reality, only once) was exact and automatic. Irene’s case is not isolated in the study of traumatic memory. Judith Herman (1992, p. 38) describes Leonore Terr’s work with a child who had been sexually abused by a babysitter at age two, and who ‘could not, at age five, remember or name the babysitter. Furthermore, he denied any knowledge or memory of being abused. But in his play he enacted scenes that exactly replicated a pornographic movie made by the babysitter.’

It may seem obvious that this type of traumatic memory is of a different kind to ‘ordinary or narrative memory’ (Van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995, p.160), but it is worth explicitly stating some distinctions. Janet observed its difference in terms of time: Irene’s re-enactment episodes took three to four hours; when she was finally able, after treatment, to tell her story, it took half a minute. After retrieving the
narrative memory, Irene was able to integrate the experience into her life and history. The memory became adaptive: she could adjust her telling of it to suit different situations, omitting, if she chose, socially inappropriate details. Her traumatic memory, on the other hand, had been entirely literal, and had no social aspect – Irene did not, or could not, interact with anyone else during her episodes. Another distinction is that traumatic memory re-enactments are evoked under particular conditions. For Irene, her position near to a bed triggered the re-enactment. Later, when she had consciously recovered the memory, she could voice it whenever she chose.

Irene’s story is a severe example of traumatic memory, as fascinating as it is disturbing. We can see the influence of such traumatic re-enactment, and the repetition compulsion, at the heart of the nineteenth century ghost story, and the Gothic tradition. I myself wrote a novel for young adults (Hogan, 2012), in which the ‘ghost’ is doomed to repeat the last hour of her life every time the clocks go back in autumn – a narrative heavily informed by traumatic re-enactment.

In drafting The Electric, however, I found myself facing barriers in practice. I drafted several scenes in which Lucas literally re-enacts the finding of his grandparents’ bodies after the shooting, or appears to ‘flashback’ to the day of Daisy’s death. Below is such a scene, witnessed from Linda’s point-of-view:

I woke to footsteps on the stairs. Lucas was climbing like he used to do, with his hands slapping the step above. He flung the door to our room wide open, and I was momentarily blinded by the hallway light. ‘Lucas?’ I said, but of course, he didn’t respond.

By the time I turned on the bedside lamp, he was standing in the corner of the room. He stared down at the carpet, and it was clear that he was in some kind of trance. He looked up at me. Through me. He was afraid. I shoved Mike, but he just rolled over.
I got out of bed and tried to hold my son, tried to engage him, but he wouldn’t meet my eye. He continued to stare at the headboard, as if I hadn’t moved at all. I found myself following his gaze.

‘Please wake up,’ I said, but he didn’t, or else he already had.

Eventually, after what seemed like a long time, he sat down, then crumpled further onto the carpet, and closed his eyes. I dragged him back to his bed.

In the morning, he gave no sign of remembering, and so I didn’t mention it. I didn’t want to upset him. And I certainly didn’t tell Mike. It happened another five or six times, always the same, until I became familiar with the exact sequence of movements. The same expression, every time.

There was a sickening moment, of course, when I realised what I was watching.

On revising these scenes with supervisors and readers, we noted several issues. Firstly, it felt too convenient, in terms of narrative exposition, to have Lucas ‘act-out’ a part of the story which otherwise remains relatively obscure until the end of the novel. It was too ‘literal’. In the writing, the scenes had sub-generic elements which jarred. Whilst the ‘truth’ of Daisy’s death – and Robert’s motives – are withheld from the reader until the final third of the novel, I was consistently downplaying and undercutting the ‘mystery’ element of the narrative, for the reasons stated in the previous chapters of this commentary. The Electric is not a mystery novel, or a ghost story. Having Linda or Mike witness Lucas’ ritual behaviour seemed like a contrived way of creating ‘suspense’ around the traumatic gap in their lives. It also suggested a denouement in which Lucas ‘solves’ the book’s mystery by either consciously recalling, or automatically enacting, the memory of Daisy’s death. This struck me as programmatic and over-determined.
The final issue was the effect it had on the presentation of Lucas’ character. In chapter one, I alluded to the objections that D/deaf readers often have to hearing portrayals of D/deaf characters (see, for example, Linett, 2013b, or Sayers, 2012). One such objection was that D/deaf characters are often drawn as in some way sub-or super-human, that they often have unrealistic powers of insight – that they are, in effect, strange or uncanny beings. Whilst the provisionally drafted re-enactments had everything to do with Lucas’ traumatic memory, and nothing to do with his D/deafness, I was wary of creating the ‘weird’ deaf boy so depressingly familiar to D/deaf readers.

After consideration, I wondered if there might be more subtle, less baldly literal and intrusive ways to make the repetitious nature of traumatic memory part of the novel, both through its content and its narrative form.

In both categories, I studied precedent examples of how to represent the repetitious nature of trauma. In Andrew Dominik’s film of Ron Hansen’s *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, (2007) there is a direct and striking example of trauma repeated.

Towards the end of the film, Robert Ford (played by Casey Affleck) is clearly disturbed by having carried out – along with his brother, Charley (Sam Rockwell), and with the utmost fear and anxiety – the execution of Jesse James. In fact, he seems to be suffering from traumatic amnesia. He tells his lover Dorothy that ‘he had no real memory of the shooting and its aftermath: he could remember lifting the gun that Jesse had given him and then it was Good Friday and he was reading about the funeral proceedings as if they’d happened a long time ago.’

And yet Robert and Charley Ford – now celebrities – find themselves acting out the deed which haunts them, on the stages of Manhattan. ‘By his own
approximation,’ says the film’s voice-over narrator, ‘Bob assassinated Jesse James over eight hundred times; he suspected no one in history had ever so often or so publicly recapitulated an act of betrayal.’ (The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford, 2007).  

Their theatre performances have more than a little in common with Irene’s traumatic re-enactments in Pierre Janet’s case study, but there is also an acknowledgement of the role of imagination in the construction of memory.  

Robert’s brother, Charley, begins their theatre tour as a particularly wooden actor, but through the repeated playing out of the incident, his performances improve, as if his memory is sharpening with the reconstruction:

\[\text{V/O: Something began to change in Charley’s stage portrayal of Jesse: his limp seemed more practiced, his high voice was spookily similar to the man’s, his newly suggested dialogue was analogous to a script Jesse might have originated.}\]

(The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford, 2007)

This is almost a reversal of the process of ‘method’ acting: Charley’s performances bring him closer to real life. Except ‘real life’ is not quite right. We can see, in the final line of the quote above, a double remove from reality. Charley’s ad-libbed words are not similar to what Jesse might have said in life; rather, they sound like a ‘script’ he might have created. The deferrals of language are very much present, here, but Charley and Robert’s awareness of the distance of their artifice from the facts of the assassination, make it no less penetrating. Charley, in fact, seems taken over by his act, and begins ‘to look at his younger brother with spite, as if he suspected that in some future performance he might present himself to a live

There is a strong suggestion, here, that Charley’s imaginative portrayal of his victim has a negative impact on him, and indeed Charley is eventually driven to suicide. This may be an example of what Kirmayer (1996, p.177) calls the ‘tendency in contemporary Western culture to underestimate (and to pathologize) the role of imagination in normal psychological development.’

Whilst the Ford brothers’ ambivalent yet hubristic capitalising on their traumatic act bears little comparison with Linda and Lucas’ repression, the film still provides an interesting example of how traumatic repetition can be built into a story.

David Vann’s (2009) Legend of a Suicide, seeks in its form to question and destabilise notions of truth in memory, whilst providing a powerful structural representation of the repetitious nature of trauma. It is a difficult book to describe, or categorise. Indeed, Alexander Linklater (2009), in his review for The Guardian, notes several important differences in the production of the book for the US and British markets. The US copy makes it clear, on the jacket, that Vann’s father, James, committed suicide in 1980; the British copy omits the note, leaving only Vann’s (2009) inscription: ‘For my father, James Edwin Vann, 1940-1980’. Even so, most readers, I suspect, would come to this book with some knowledge of the author’s biography.

The book is divided into five short pieces, and one novella, and the power of the work comes from the way these stories relate to, and contradict each other. ‘Ichthyology’, the opening story, reads like a supremely well-crafted piece of creative
non-fiction. It begins with a retrospective, declarative summary of the early life of the narrator, Roy, and his family:

When my father had finished his sentence with the Navy, we moved to Ketchikan, an island in southeastern Alaska, where he bought a dental practice and, three years later, a fishing boat.

(Vann, 2009, p.1)

By the end of the story, the father, Jim, has killed himself on the stern of *The Osprey*. All of the proceeding stories reference this act in some way. The book’s centrepiece novella, ‘Sukkwan Island’, does so most strikingly. The premise of the novella has Jim, who misguidedly considers himself to be an outdoorsman, taking Roy – 13, at this point – to a remote, barely populated island off Alaska. From Roy’s third-person point-of-view, we see that Jim is woefully unprepared for living in the wilderness, and also severely depressed. He cries himself to sleep and makes disturbing, manipulative disclosures to his son. The reader leans on knowledge gleaned from the earlier stories in the book, and finds Jim’s behaviour very much consistent with the man who killed himself in ‘Ichtyology’. However, deep into ‘Sukkwan Island’, there is a dramatic reversal: Roy shoots himself dead with his father’s pistol. This narrative move is both extremely jarring – because of its contradiction of the previous stories – and yet also emotionally convincing.

The following pieces twist the material again: in ‘Ketchikan’, a 30-year-old Roy returns to his childhood town, and reflects on the effects of his father’s suicide. No explanation is given for the book’s contradictions, and none is required. Linklater’s (2009) review fittingly describes the power of the book as emerging from
‘the way a real-world event is imagined, changed and reimagined as if it were taking place over and again, in parallel but contradictory worlds.’ Vann’s imagination exhausts itself on the repetition of his trauma, which works its way into many of the lines of the book. Below is a description of an archer fish’s killing of a fly, at the end of Ichtyology:

The archer fish tensed up, danced in a fluttering circle with his hooked lip at the surface the fulcrum, followed the mad flight of the fly with quiet deliberation, and spat his pellet of water with such celerity and yet so little movement that it seemed not to have happened at all, and yet there was the fly, mired in the water, sending off his million tiny ripples of panic.

(Vann, 2009, p.10)

The repeating circles of those ‘ripples of panic’ could easily stand as a key to reading the book.

In the examples above, and in Mulholland Drive (2001), which I mentioned in chapter two, we can see how the repetition compulsion, provoked by traumatic memory, can disrupt not only narrative, but also the typical binary relationship between fact and fiction. Stirred by the apposite inventiveness of these works, I wrote a draft in which Daisy’s affair with Paul is revealed (through Linda’s section) to be a revisionist fantasy taking place as the bullet passes through her brain, using as raw materials the ornaments and pictures in the bedroom in which she dies. For example, in one scene with Paul, she hears the approach of horses which are, in fact, the Royal Doulton figurines on her window sill. Paul’s physical appearance, in the draft, is based on a broken decorative clock in the foyer of the Savoy cinema, and in
the 1960s, she – anachronistically – finds Lucas’ modern hearing aid in her bathroom. The draft was unsuccessful, but it proved formative as an exploratory first step in creating a novel which incorporated the idea of traumatic repetition.

Having surveyed relevant examples, and outlined my experiments in attempting to portray something of trauma’s repetitious elements, I will now explain how I came to the decisions evident in the final draft of Lucas’ sections of *The Electric*.

In terms of content, the relatively early decision to steer clear of a melodramatic denouement involving Lucas mentally unearthing the memories of Daisy’s death, sent me back to psychoanalysis (so to speak) for a suitable alternative.

In the process of redrafting and researching, I noted that several of the scenes describing Lucas’ inchoate memories of his grandmother corresponded roughly to Freud’s concept of the ‘screen memory’. A screen memory is a persistent but seemingly banal recollection which, Freud proposed, contains the traces of more profound material. ‘Childhood amnesia,’ Freud wrote (1914, p. 148), is in some cases, ‘completely counterbalanced by screen memories. Not only some but all of what is essential from childhood has been retained in these memories. It is simply a question of knowing how to extract it out of them by analysis.’

So, in a screen memory, ‘the essential elements of an experience are represented…by the inessential elements of the same experience.’ (Freud, 1899, p.307) ‘The banal,’ Adam Phillips (1995, p.65) explains, ‘is a cover story’ for the unacceptable events hidden behind it.

In effect, several of Lucas’ remembered fragments work as screen memories. His brief recollections of his grandmother are apparently prosaic or obscure, but I tried to layer them with suggestion. Most of the vignettes are about loss, in some
way: the attempt to catch the seed-pods; the conversation through the window about leaving the house; the missing glasses. The exchange about the making of silk contains a suggestion of violence along with a sense memory (the smell of silk) one might associate with a bedroom. The fox which replaces Daisy under the streetlight could be aligned with the Royal Doulton figurines on the window sill of the room in which Lucas found her dead, while the apparently happy memory of the chase through the park ends with them both on the ground, Lucas atop his grandmother’s prostrate body, in a way which resonates with the scene of her death.

These ‘screen memories’ not only allowed for a more subtle approach to Lucas’ recollections of his grandmother, they also enabled a method of exposing another of the book’s disjunctions. Like many families, the Weatherall/Seacombe’s have between them a vast collective biographical knowledge, but their inability to share that knowledge (not always in a blameworthy sense) means that they are often, individually, condemned to a limited and partial awareness of their own autobiographical narratives. The reader of *The Electric* is able to gather knowledge from each of the three perspectives, and can therefore appreciate the irony of the disconnections. If Linda and Lucas were better able to communicate, they could pool their memory resources: Linda could help to contextualise and interpret Lucas’ elusive and fragmentary screen memories, and Lucas could add valuable emotional colour to Linda’s conception of her mother.

Lucas’ screen memories – isolated and esoteric – are material to be scrutinised. Cassie’s opening question, when Lucas recounts his first recovered memory (of his grandmother having lost her glasses), is, ‘What do you think it means?’, and although Lucas’ reply is somewhat glib, the question begins their search for significance in his recollections. Adam Phillips (1995, p.68) describes a similar
process in psychoanalysis, where ‘life-stories fragment in the telling; in order to be read, interpreted, they have to be unreadable. The patient has to refuse himself the conventional satisfaction of narrative.’

I have outlined, in previous chapters, other reasons for refusing narrative satisfaction. Here, however, we can observe how the form of the novel makes reference to the process of its being read. Lucas and Cassie are not (hopefully) alone in trying to interpret the former’s memory fragments – the novel’s reader must also participate in this activity, and in that way the reader’s experience mirrors Lucas’ difficult search for significance, his acts of interpretation.

Also with regards to the content of the novel, I have portrayed Lucas as suffering from a less literal form of repetition than that described in the above description of Janet’s patient, Irene: he must confront a cycle of abandonment and loss that repeats in his current relationships. Until the closing scenes of the novel (in which Linda explicitly states her determination to stay with him), Lucas’ relationships are characterised by departures. His father has left the family home, his mother has retreated into grief, and – most obviously – Cassie suddenly leaves her position as his learning assistant. Caroline Garland gives an account of how loss and difficulty in childhood can be subject to symbolic repetition:

A relationship that begins well may be disrupted by a tendency for the individual to bring about circumstances which resemble the point at which things originally went wrong between mother and child. [...] The hope is that a different outcome can be achieved, but the repetition can result instead in reinforcement...there is a bitter preoccupation with the failure and a tendency to anger and resentment in the repetition of it in later relationships.

(Garland, 1998, p.158)
In terms of the novel’s form, the splicing of the strands has a strong cyclical element. In novels which feature multiple perspectives on the same event, the tendency towards repetition is often seen as a hazard to be avoided, but in *The Electric*, I have tried to use it to a suggestive advantage. Additionally, the structure enacts a ‘return of the repressed’ in the way that Daisy’s life rises up at intervals through the gaps in the 1990s chapters. Both strands are moving towards the traumatic event – Linda and Lucas as they begin to remember and discover more about the past, and Daisy through the simple passing of time.

**Linda: Life in the Gaps**

At the beginning of the novel, Lucas has no conscious access to the traumatic event of his childhood, and may be said – in some ways – to be living in the ‘memory-less state of almost complete darkness’, which Sodré (2014, p.184) describes at the beginning of this chapter. Linda, on the other hand, suffers from ‘the emotional inability to forget…the problem of an excessive ‘illumination’ of particular events in the mind.’ (Sodré, 2014, p.184) Except that’s not quite accurate, for several reasons. Firstly, while the effects of grief for her mother have persisted, untransformed, for a decade, and eroded her relationships and professional life, Linda has found a way to shut down her memories – to dim the lights. In the novel’s opening, she has yet to examine, in any meaningful way, the events of her mother’s death, which she did not directly witness. This turning away from the harsh illumination of her trauma has also involved a wholesale and intentional ‘forgetting’ of her mother’s life – a
necessary side-effect. While Lucas *unwittingly* lives his life in ‘the narrow beam of a candlelight’ (Sodré, 2014, p.184), Linda – when we first meet her – seeks desperately to do so. It is her way of coping.

Finding the letters in her parents’ attic is the first step in undermining the psychological defence against memory that Linda has created. But there is no sudden reversal of this mechanism. The process is slow, and Linda is still resistant to the memories – both good and bad – of her mother. She has carefully developed an emotional dissociation.

Kirmayer (1996, p.181) claims that dissociation is ‘a rupture in narrative, but it is also maintained by narrative because the shape of narrative around the dissociation protects (reveals and conceals) the gap.’

This description seems very relevant to Linda – in the ambivalent positioning of narrative, the tension between revelation and repression, and the identification of a ‘gap’. I wrote several drafts of Linda which used very particular formal techniques to represent the effects of trauma. A brief extract of an early draft is useful, here, especially if viewed in comparison with the final version. Below is one page from a draft written in December 2015.

‘Mike, do you think Lucas has been acting strangely?’ I said.
‘Bloody hell, Linda, of course he has,’ he said. ‘If we had to have a conversation every time Lucas was acting weird, we’d be talking all the time.’
I laughed, but Mike just turned and left the room. He wasn’t the sort of man to notice when he’d just given a damning indictment of his own marriage.
In a film, death is to be overcome. Someone dies, and the character left behind is sad, then angry. But then they embark on an unusual new relationship, or they repair an old one, and that helps them to see the beauty in life once again. They turn away from death. They grow.

That didn’t happen with me. After the initial burst of fury, I just ruined things in a very slow, unfilmic way. My mother loved the cinema, and she didn’t mind a slow movie, but she wouldn’t have watched the film of my grief. She’d have walked out halfway through. After about four and a half years.

In the attic, though, the pointless nothing I’d been living through since she died was replaced by something else. It may have been the effect of finding that photograph. Suddenly, staring at the curve of her jaw, and her slightly open mouth, I really *missed* her. I really missed my mum. Of course, I had never known her at the age she was in the photograph. In essence, I was looking at a stranger. But so what? I wanted to get her back, to get her life back, to know as much about her as I possibly could.

And I had these three letters. I was sure that I would learn a great deal from them. But, that first night, I felt frustrated. What did I find out? Not much.

Paul Kane was from Winnipeg, Canada. He had known my mother during the war, and his handwriting was a mess.

Even such a short excerpt reveals the significant differences to the novel submitted as part of this thesis. Most notably, the excerpt above is presented in the first person, in largely declarative fragments. Typographically, there are white spaces between the fragments, which, for the most part, are not indented. The subjects of the fragments, while loosely related, are not always contingently
connected. There are fewer ‘scenes’, here, than in the final version, and there is more abstract reflection.  

This method was developed after reading several epigrammatic novels dealing with the subjects of grief and trauma, including *Big Ray* by Michael Kimball (2012), Michel Laub’s (2011) *Diary of the Fall*, but particularly *Why Did I Ever* by Mary Robison (2001).

*Why Did I Ever* is a novel written in 536 brief fragments, many of them concerned with the banalities of the everyday life of its protagonist, Money Breton, a script doctor who is struggling to come to terms with a sexual attack on her son, Paulie. The fragments are numbered, and separated by white space, as in the reproduction, below (again, I have opted for an image, here, to preserve the visual page layout).

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5 It is worth noting that, in the early drafts, Lucas and Linda had their own discrete point-of-view sections, as did Mike. Mike’s POV sections were eventually cut, and Lucas and Linda’s combined, so that the final novel alternates between timeframes, rather than between characters.
Why Did I Ever

Cyborgs at the Gala

So I've dressed my best for this studio meeting.
However, woven and stitched into the bodice of that executive woman's sweater are rosebuds, and they're still alive.

326

All of the liars at this conference table are referring to "my second reading" or saying, "on my third pass through the script." Are they psycho? A John Ashbery poem you could read three times, maybe.

327

The only thing I really have going for me is my attention deficit. It's very, very impressive to these people. How I forget to collect my checks, or fail to kiss the ring of whichever the hell one is the studio president.

On the debit side, I missed removing an electric roller this morning and did the sushi lunch and the studio meeting with it lodged in the back of my hair.

328

"I'm sure you regard yourself as a nonconformist," says Belinda.
"No, a good beatnik," I say, with a tap of the tip of my pen.
The fragments that constitute the text are sometimes only one line long. They range from first person self-exhortations, to very brief snippets of conversation out of context, to slightly more protracted scenes in locations from Hollywood studio offices to late-night Laundromats.

As the novel progresses, the reader finds, amongst the more mundane and amusing incidents and reflections, disturbing elliptical references to a darker situation in Money’s life – the aftermath of the attack on her son. In fragment 218, Money is trying, with some frustration, to write notes for a meeting with some film executives in Los Angeles. For the previous two pages of the novel, she has simply described her prevarications: the watching of the TV news, the furniture in her accommodation, the moon outside the window. Fragment 219, however, is of an entirely different nature:

I can fit the palm of my hand between Paulie’s eyes. I know what it feels like to do that.

The man hanged him. For one thing. Had him hanging by the neck.

(Robison, 2001, p.78)

This strategy is repeated throughout the novel. Brief, harrowing information about the attack rises up between the quotidian episodes that repress it. Fragment 368 features Money berating her cat, fragment 378 is about late-night shopping, but in between, we have several disclosures about Paulie and his assailant, including fragment 373: ‘Whereas, the results of the Spitwad Criminal’s HIV test may not be used as evidence in a trial.’ (Robison, 2001, p.137)
As this formal pattern continues, the reader’s response to the white spaces between the fragments alters. Thoughts of Paulie – a result of the reader’s natural curiosity and worry – begin to fill the gaps in Money’s narration, until they become one of the novel’s only real continuities.

An alternative approach to a story featuring a mother’s relationship with a son who has been the victim of a violent attack might focus solely on material related to the central event. We might start with the attack itself, and then hear, in a sustained way, about the build-up to the trial, which may constitute the narrative climax of the novel. But Why Did I Ever is more concerned with the way trauma quietly constrains everyday life, even as everyday life goes on, as it must.

Robison explains as much, when describing the way in which Why Did I Ever was composed:

Various horrible things had happened, as they sometimes will, and I was having difficulty. I was having more than difficulty. Like a repulsive videotape was on automatic replay in my head. So to get through, I began scribbling notes. I would go out, take a notebook. Or drive, or park wherever and take notes. I would note anything left. Anything that still seemed funny or scary or involving for four seconds. Some berserk conversation I overheard. The crap on the radio. This big, brilliant cat. Ridiculous weather. Then it was months before I read over the scribbles and realized they had a steady voice, and that there were characters and themes. Although none of the material was organized at all except around my urgent need to distract myself.

(Robison in Murray, 2001)

In the early drafts of Linda’s sections of The Electric, I tried to combine this identification of the need for distraction, with Robison’s use of white space. Linda refers, quite openly in the early drafts, to the predicaments and coping mechanisms
of her grief. She wonders, at one point, why her son seems so emotionally restrained: ‘On the one hand, I suppose, the answers were obvious, but I was trying very hard, at that point, to forget the sight of him in the hospital, his arms covered in blood up to the elbow.’

This confession of Linda’s mirrors some of the explicit statements which Money Breton makes throughout *Why Did I Ever*, for example: ‘My thoughts about Paulie are a thing, over there, I’ll have to go through and sort sometime. Maybe keep some of it separate.’ (Robison, 2001, p.26)

Through Paul Landry’s letters, Linda finds a way to retrieve something of her mother’s life, without initially confronting the trauma of her death. The ‘practically illegible’ letters, and the multiple possible transcriptions of each sentence, become yet another way for Linda to distract herself. Inevitably, however, Linda’s investigations lead her back to her mother’s death, during her meeting with the elderly Paul Landry.

In both Lucas and Linda’s sections, then, there is a fragmentary element. It is lightly retained in the final version of Linda’s narrative, and is perhaps most explicitly suggested by the missing words in her transcriptions of Paul Landry’s letters. In Lucas’ sections, fragmentation is evident in the severed connections between his contextually isolated screen memories. In the words of Sodré (2014, p.185), this fragmentation embodies the disruption of the meaningful connection between the experience of ‘now’, and ‘who I am and was’ which often afflicts those who have suffered trauma. Adam Phillips (1995, p.67) describes free-association as ‘memory in its most incoherent and therefore fluent form. Because of repression,’ he says, ‘the past can only return as disarray in de-narrativised fragments.’
However, in the process of drafting, workshopping and revising my work, it’s clear that I retreated somewhat from the more extreme formal illustrations of fragmentation, particularly in Linda’s sections. In practice, the primary reason for this decision in favour of moderation was simply to serve the novel as a whole. In *Why Did I Ever*, Money’s is the single narrative voice, and the novel is short enough and uncluttered enough to support her mode of narration. Combining a first-person voice with two third person viewpoints, whilst also switching time-frames was a difficult endeavour, particularly when that first-person voice was as fragmented and elusive as that of Linda’s in the above extracts. Reader’s found that early version of Linda to be too inert and static, and her sections contributed to a sense of confusion in those initial drafts.

And so, Linda’s voice switched to the third person, and her narrative strand tightened around the search for Paul. Her story was narrated in a more conventional manner, through extended scenes, primarily for the practical reasons stated above. Retrospectively, however, the decision to balance the portrayal of disruption in Linda’s and Lucas’ sections – to set the disjunctures within a more coherent narrative context – can be seen as evidence of a consistent approach throughout the novel. *The Electric* functions through a tension between coherence and disruption, and this is very apparent in its representation of remembered trauma.

Indeed, not all writers on trauma and narrative support the idea of memory as essentially fragmented. Kirmayer (1996, p.176) argues that describing memory in terms of ‘snapshots’ is a ‘naïve view’, and instead seeks to bring to the fore the role of narrative in memory. ‘The process typically works in the other direction: narrative structure supplies the temporal sequence of memory.’ (Kirmayer, 1996, p.176)
Mark Freeman (2010) also takes issue with the idea that coherence and narrative have no place in the re-telling of trauma. Survivors, he says, still desire to speak – no matter how unsatisfactory narrative might be as a tool for representing events at the limits of tolerance. Doing so prevents ‘the utter dispersion of experience, its evaporation into nothingness.’ (Freeman, 2010, p.171)

Freeman’s approach is measured. He argues for a storytelling method which interrogates narrative coherence whilst still making use of it:

The idea of coherence itself needs to be rethought in a way that at once explodes the unity-harmony-closure equation while still retaining the sense-making ‘binding’ function that narrative is designed to serve.

(Freeman, 2010, p.171)

It is important to note that Freeman is referring mainly to autobiographical expression in his arguments, but the structures can be applied to fiction, where characters, rather than real people ‘need to find a language commensurate with, if not adequate to, their trauma and their lives.’ Freeman says this language ‘will not, and cannot, be a language rooted in unity, harmony and closure.’ (2010, p.171)

In Freeman’s choice of words, we can see the competing impulses that characterise my strategies in *The Electric*. Lucas, in a literal sense, and Linda, more figuratively, must find a language for their experiences, even if that language falls short. Fragmented narratives, as Freeman implies, are still narratives; but the other side of that argument is that narratives, however conventional, are almost always subject to disruption. This push and pull between disjuncture and connection is everywhere in *The Electric*. It is evident in the setting of fragmentation within a
broadly coherent narrative structure, and it is apparent in the counterbalancing of the characters’ need to speak and the impossibility of perfect articulation.

‘Articulation’ is an interesting and rich word, here; it refers most obviously to the idea of producing clear and distinct sounds in *speech* – a concept with a strong and ambivalent relevance to Lucas’ sections of the novel. But it also contains in its etymology a resonant tension between the sense of ‘connection’ (as in the Latin noun ‘articulus’ – joint) and ‘division’ (in the Latin verb ‘articulare’ – to divide into distinct parts). In the concluding remarks below, I will round on the tension between these two ideas – a tension which runs throughout *The Electric*, and is a common theme across the chapters of this commentary.
Conclusion

The Electric is a novel about accepting, dealing with, and even exploiting, narrative disruption. Each of the characters begins the book in search of a coherent autobiographical narrative, but in place of linearity and coherence they find spatial simultaneity, compression, contradiction, repetition, and gaps. They find fluid boundaries between reality and fantasy, memory and imagination. The characters learn to manipulate those disruptive features in order to generate what one might refer to as ‘alternatives’.

Lucas, for example, ends the book by synthesising his experiences in speech and sign – by choosing to be ‘both’. Thus, he breaks free of the binary identities offered to him by the oral-hearing and cultural Deaf routes.

The relationship between Daisy and Paul is, in a sense, an erosion of the boundary between a mundane and oppressive ‘real’ life, and the fantasy of the movies they consume. Like many women of her generation, Daisy uses films to interrogate her lived experience, and remain ‘wakeful’.

For Linda, the quest to find Paul, and the resulting discovery of his side of the story, constitute a re-versioning of her mother’s life. It is this alternative to the ‘official’ story of the mercy killing which allows Linda to finally grieve.

Each of the characters, then, is a creative, imaginative reader of some kind. Daisy pieces together films viewed in the ‘wrong’ order. She finds that their
emotional power is enhanced by the disordered narrative episodes, and the mental investment she must make to understand them. ‘The deepest part of her mind’ forges connections between the anti-chronological movie fragments she sees.

For her part, Linda re-reads and deciphers the few remaining letters of the correspondence between Daisy and Paul. When transcribing the letters, Linda must inhabit Paul’s point-of-view to fill in the sentence-level gaps. She must come to know him, and learn to speak in his voice. The boundary between the creative acts of reading and writing evaporates for Linda.

She doesn’t know what a sentence is going to be until she’s written it, and then there it is: the thoughts of this foreign man from the past, on the bright white page in her own handwriting. She finds peace in being someone else for a while.

*(The Electric, ch.1)*

Lucas’ life is full of reading. He must lipread his hearing teachers, and – like anyone learning (or in his case re-learning) a language – he must fill in the gaps in his BSL knowledge. As a child, there was no sense of frustration in his reading of films without access to the dialogue; he simply created his own stories based on the visuals. And as a young adult, he finds himself exploring the spaces of his partial memories of his grandmother, and reading them for meaning and significance. He is only just beginning that interpretive journey as the novel ends.

Retrospectively, I can see several ways in which the ‘reading arcs’ of these characters are analogous to some of the processes I went through in creating the novel. Firstly – as this commentary exhibits – much of *The Electric* was written in
response to reading. These readings were often factual accounts or studies from disciplines other than fiction.

Often, there was an act of transposition from one mode of enquiry to another. Sometimes that imaginative transformation was as straightforward as using speech patterns and turns of phrase from an oral history respondent, in character dialogue. At other times, it was a case of approaching the same subject with a different methodology. Kit-fong Au’s questions (2011), referenced in chapter one, are a good example. The first question, reproduced below, is theoretical, abstract, and hypothetical.

1. ‘If adolescents and adults re-learn their childhood language, will the re-learning activate their childhood memory for other kinds of experience as well?’

(Kit-fong Au, 2011, p.184)

Kit-fong Au uses this question to guide a controlled study of Korean adoptees, testing their grammar abilities after they relearned their native language in later life. My method, on the other hand, was to imaginatively explore the question by embodying it in Lucas’ life. Fiction becomes a way of speculating, of working through possible alternatives.

On occasion, the methods of other disciplines seemed apt and appealing. In fact, the most enlightening account of D/deaf life did not come from a novel, a medical study, a memoir, or a cultural history. Laura Blackburn’s (2000) ethnographic study of a D/deaf boy in a large hearing family was based on the ten months she spent in the home of Henry and his hearing siblings. Blackburn makes many poignant observations of domestic moments. She notes, for example,
(Blackburn, 2000, p.230) that Henry always wore his shoes in the house because he worried that his family would leave suddenly (his other siblings picked up auditory clues about outings, which Henry couldn’t access). Blackburn’s vignettes are often quietly moving: she describes Daniel, Henry’s hearing brother, using his voice ‘in a quiet whisper’ (2000, p.232) as he signs, and tells of how Henry taught his infant siblings (triplets) American Sign Language by ‘articulating signs on the baby’s body.’ (2000, p.234)

Whilst I could hardly transform myself into a participant ethnographer with Blackburn’s expertise, I learned a great deal from the studiousness of her observations, and was influenced, in my portrayal of Lucas and Daisy’s relationship, by her tendency towards small, self-encapsulating episodes.

In addition to these responses to reading, my interdisciplinary method also involved an exploitation of the gaps and contradictions between different factual sources. For example, the overall impression from the sources I consulted on the history of police wives during the middle part of the twentieth century was one of oppression - of women ‘incorporated’ (Callan, Ardner, 1984) into unpaid work, and under constant institutional surveillance and scrutiny. The emphasised purpose of those histories was often to cast an important light on the iniquities of life in police families, and of the ‘hidden’ sacrifices made by the policemen’s wives, rather than to necessarily detail resistance to the repressive structures. In the history of cinemagoing describing roughly the same era, however, I found first person accounts of young women who were self-possessed and politically dissenting. Given their age, social class, and professions, I could connect those two groups of women, with some confidence. Through an imaginative conflation, I was in effect able to take the
strong personalities from sources such as Mayer’s *British Cinemas and their Audiences* (1948), and put them into the situations described by, for example, Callan and Ardener in *The Incorporated Wife*. That process was not as neat or deliberate as it perhaps sounds, but Daisy is certainly a character created in the gaps between such readings.

Another way in which my creative process is reflected and referenced in the book is in the acknowledgment of the limitations of prose narrative fiction as a representational tool. When Lucas and Linda attempt to articulate traumatic memory, they must confront the way their experience resists linguistic portrayal. Cathy Caruth (1995) describes even a traumatic re-enactment as conveying ‘both the truth of an event and the truth of its incomprehensibility.’ (p.153) In attempting to rebuild the past, Linda can use her imagination, scrutinise letters, scour the local studies library, and force a confession from Paul; Lucas can piece together a social reality from signs and fragments of speech; but both of them must accept that much of life eludes expression, and the experiences of the past cannot always be rescued with words.

In the same way, I had to acknowledge, when attempting to complete the representational tasks set by this novel, that ‘the capacity of the word to represent has always been fundamentally shaped by the resistance of the world to its mimetic power.’ (Boxall, 2015, p.60) The gaps in the sentences that Lucas lipreads, and the indecipherable words of Paul Landry’s letters, are amongst my formal attempts to bring attention to the difficulties inherent in representation. They are the linguistic scars of a losing battle with reality.
Everywhere, in the literature of trauma, one finds references to ‘unspeakable’
events and ‘speechless horror’, but as a user of a manual language, young Luca was
quite happily ‘speechless’ before the death of his grandmother. Writing Lucas forced
me to look closer at the value we place on different modes of representation.

Maren Linett (2013a) notes that twentieth century western thought tended to
find language to be a prerequisite for subjectivity, and (through ‘common slippage’)
to equate language with speech, with unwelcome consequences for the D/deaf:

Such an equation of language and speech leads many to question or dismiss the
subjectivity of those who do not use spoken languages, and shapes both
fictional representations and real-life understandings of the deaf.

(Linett, 2013a, p.466)

I tentatively hope that my portrayal of Lucas might, for the hearing reader,
problematicize the notion that ‘speechlessness’ has a necessarily negative value.

In an interesting connection, Peter Boxall (2015) begins his book, The Value of
the Novel, with a discussion of the idea of 'voice' in fiction:

I want to ask...in effect, what you hear when you read. Do you hear what you
are reading as a voice in your head? Does the novel speak in a particular kind
of voice, a voice specific to its form, which is proper to the novel itself? Is the
novel as a form particularly well adapted to creating the conditions of voice
and of hearing, to producing a scenario in which a speaker addresses us in what
George Eliot has called our 'inward voice'? And does this inward voice talk to
us in a particularly intimate way, entangling itself with the voice with which
we think, with which we speak to ourselves? As Don DeLillo's narrator puts it,
at the shattering opening of his novel Underworld, is it the case that the novel
'speaks in your voice', entering into the most private spaces in which you give
sound and form to thought and words.
Boxall's purpose, in this case, is to discuss 'humanist assumptions' about the novel and voice, along with the critical movements which challenged those assumptions in the 1960s. He cites James Gibson (2001), who acknowledged that the idea of narrative voice still, at the time of writing, exerted ‘a peculiar hold over the literary imagination.’ (Boxall, 2015, p.23). Gibson asks, ‘Do we know how to attend to the muteness of narrative, how not to hear it?’ (Gibson, 2001 in Boxall, 2015, p.23)

Deaf writers and readers enter into this debate from an interesting angle. Emanuelle Laborit recalls the process of composing *The Cry of the Gull*. She and her team of translators had ‘long discussions about what it meant to put on paper my three-dimensional language, which takes place in space and is full of movement.’ (Laborit in Lindgren, 2012, p.352). Here, Laborit is expressing an ambivalence about the representative power of prose, which is almost parallel to Boxall’s. Just as Boxall and Gibson ponder whether we ‘hear’ a narrative voice in prose, Laborit encounters frustration with the gap between sign language, and the written word. Lindgren, in fact, notes that a book like Laborit’s ‘calls attention to and productively exploits the tension between sign language, and the written word. Does Lucas, as a bilingual ‘reader’, hear a text? What part does narrative ‘voice’ play when he recovers memories of his grandmother – memories encoded in a language which is not spoken? Why must the ‘inner voice’ of consciousness be a spoken one? Kyle (1981, p.72) recounts that the children of Deaf parents ‘sign
themselves in their sleep…we have seen deaf people repeating a grocery list in sign, and signing to make clear to themselves something read in English.’

In my novel, the signed conversations between Cassie, Lucas, and Daniel appear in italicised written English. As much as possible, given the limits of my BSL abilities, my practical method was to sign those conversations, before ‘translating’ them back to English. Is it possible for the hearing reader to intuit or imagine the silence (or perhaps I should say ‘relative quiet’ – my experience is that conversing D/deaf people are rarely silent) behind those conversations? My purpose, in the novel, was not to answer these questions, or to use Lucas to contribute to the theoretical debate on voice in literature, but *The Electric* seems to raise these issues regarding the possibilities of textually re-creating aspects of lived reality – aspects such as voice and silence, thought and memory.

We have returned, yet again, to David Lodge (2003, p.49), because *The Electric* is not just preoccupied with the ‘construction of reality’ in the mind of the character – with mimicking the nature of internal consciousness – it is also concerned with constructing a version of reality in the mind of the reader. *The Electric*, along with this commentary, acknowledges, on all levels, the difficulty of both of those communicative tasks. This thesis, as a whole, restates the value of the attempt to communicate with narrative, whilst also accepting and sometimes exploiting the ways in which all representational forms – sign language, cinema, prose fiction, and prose fact – fall short of their mimetic aims.

When using an interdisciplinary working method, the place where factual enquiry stops can be the point at which imaginative writing begins. Likewise, a film seen in the wrong order can still be powerful; a partial memory of mysterious
significance can provide an opportunity for exploration; the gaps in the text of a letter could be filled with the reader’s imaginative identification; and if a particular language modality fails to capture reality, one could try another. These examples from the novel are my attempts to ‘call attention to and productively exploit the tension’ (Lindgren, 2012, p.344) between words, signs, images, and what they try to capture.

Like the characters in *The Electric*, and the many writers from across the disciplines who influenced my practice, I reached for expressive exactitude when composing the novel. Sometimes the subjects of my fiction resisted words and narrative, and this resistance became part of the novel, too. In a phrase which aptly describes the duality present in *The Electric*, Boxall (2015, p.27) eventually reflects that if the novel has a voice, it is one which ‘can’t speak and can’t cease, composed at once of sound and silence.’
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Appendix

Interior of The Savoy, Brighton, 1940s
Exterior shot of the Gaiety Cinema, Lewes Road, shortly before its opening in 1939.

Interior shot of the foyer of the Regent Cinema, North Street.
Before (above) and after (below) shots of the Astoria Cinema, Brighton