

book review

Trauma
With or Without Theory

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Mick Broderick and Antonio Traverso (eds)
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The essays included in this anthology were first presented at the Interrogating Trauma conference held in Perth in 2008 and represent a new body of research in trauma studies, which has already gone through a number of stages. Although the concept of trauma is derived from psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, over the past century trauma has also become a key term in cultural criticism and theory. Trauma has been understood in this larger cultural and historical sense in the writings of Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida, Žižek and others, often fusing elements of psychoanalytic, Marxian and linguistic theory. The ‘moment’ of trauma studies

arrived in the mid 1990s when, in her two often-cited books *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth brought psychoanalysis, deconstructive literary theory and Holocaust studies into a productive new constellation. This was followed by a more nuanced and critical reflection on this new interdisciplinary field of trauma studies field by Dominick LaCapra, who was also often concerned with the example of the Holocaust. The sense of debate around trauma and representation that emerged from the writings of Caruth and LaCapra was later elaborated in new contexts such as cinema and visual culture studies. Trauma studies has for many promised to bring the complexities of postmodern theory back to the historical legacies of war and genocide that we carry from the twentieth century into the twenty-first. This new anthology follows the lead of E. Anne Kaplan's *Trauma Culture* (2005) by including discussions of news media along with cinema, but goes further to include literature, opera and visual arts.¹

Contemporary research in this area has become preoccupied with problems such as how to memorialise trauma without over-identifying with the position of victim or advancing ideological agendas, such as violent retribution or forgetting social injustice. Underlying these problems are the ambiguities that underlie the relations between psychological and cultural trauma. Is cultural trauma to be understood literally as a collective psychological disturbance or is it a rhetorical construction of collective memory? And if it is the latter then does the use of the term trauma confuse rather than clarify this historical narrative? As there have now been numerous anthologies exploring trauma in cultural criticism, each new book in this area prompts the reader to ask if trauma continues to be a useful and provocative area of research when taken outside the more tangible goals of psychotherapy. When we say 'trauma' in cultural criticism are we really talking about violence and catastrophe? To what extent has trauma become a 'catch all' for any representation of human suffering?

The editors begin their introduction by noting the attention that the arts over the past century have given to 'traumatic historical events'. (1) This is a phrase that would have benefited from further discussion, as no event is in itself traumatic but is defined as such through processes of recollection and representation. Psychoanalysis has always stressed that trauma is a problem of memory, not a

property of a specific kind of event or experience. There is a danger that trauma is taken as an unquestioned category and that trauma studies looks at various case studies of political violence and how this is transmitted as a memory by different modes of representation. We also need always to ask: who is calling what a trauma and why?

One of the stated goals of this collection is to move beyond the Euro-American contexts in which trauma theory has largely been elaborated. This is a potentially important development because trauma is always embedded in contested versions of history and memory. The editors propose to counteract the predominance of Euro-American catastrophe and turn more attention to events in the so-called Third World and global culture. At issue also is the dominance of Euro-American writings in the field of trauma theory, which the anthology also sets out to question. The relation between content and method, however, is a complex one as new non-European case studies may be approached using Western theories that themselves reproduce ideological constructions of the other. Thus the converse problem that emerges when changing the historical emphasis is that what is at stake in different conceptions of trauma may become less clear. This anthology includes quite varied responses to these problems: some essays apply Euro-American theories to non-Western examples, some seek to contest hegemonic theory with new formulations, while others avoid theoretical debates altogether.

In many of the essays the philosophical dimension of trauma studies (Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida and so on) has all but disappeared. Instead the primary references are the more applied studies of Caruth, Kaplan, Jenny Edkins (2003) and Jill Bennett (2005).² This should not, however, be understood as a turn away from 'high theory' to the 'real world', as the concepts used by this latter group of critics are often directly derived from the theories of earlier thinkers. Without acknowledging the theoretical subtleties of psychoanalysis, critical theory or deconstruction, trauma becomes primarily understood in terms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a therapeutic category that can be employed without any consideration of the concepts that underlie cultural or historical trauma. The two sections on journalism and mental health issues, in particular, tend to assume PTSD as the principal point of reference.

The first section of the book, *Memorials, Trauma and the Nation*, includes essays on the Rwandan genocide and the massacre of Aborigines in colonial Australia, while the next section on the Holocaust includes discussions of the writings of Imre Kertész and of a survivor's video testimony. The essays by Giorgia Doná on Rwanda and Jennifer Harris on Australia are primarily concerned with contested histories and tend to assume genocide and colonial violence as traumatic events. Doná does, however, present a critique of the role of trauma in the discourses of both national and humanitarian agencies. She examines the ways that memorial sites and commemorations, specifically in new online forms, make claims to assume a psychotherapeutic role for whole societies. The ways that digital media displace events in time and space, along with a rhetoric of public mourning, can serve to disguise more overtly ideological rewritings of histories of violent conflict. Harris considers the ways colonial settler histories are contested by indigenous voices but also superseded by a new inclusive narrative of national reconciliation.

In the section focused on the Holocaust, Magdalena Zolkos takes a more theoretical turn and provides a detailed account of Jean Laplanche's psychoanalytic conception of trauma, explaining its relation to both Freud and Kertész. Laplanche returns to Freud's early seduction theory, which stresses dependence on the other in the unconscious formation of trauma. This decentering of the subject, argues Zolkos, demands that we see representations of trauma as always inadequate attempts to translate enigmatic messages from the other that constitute the unconscious formation of the subject. In the next essay Stephen Goddard discusses the case of his own mother, a Holocaust survivor. He considers whether video testimony can re-traumatise the witness or transmit their trauma to another generation. Following Zolkos's essay, one can ask whether Laplanche's conception of trauma as translation would complicate any notion of direct transgenerational transmission of traumatic memory. This notion of a more direct transmission is a central feature of Marianne Hirsch's influential notion of 'postmemory'.

Next comes a section on visual arts, literature and opera. Questions about translating Euro-American trauma theory into new cultural contexts come to the fore in these essays. These questions certainly remain under-researched and are of central importance to the project of this collection. We need a more extensive consideration of the historical precedents for such research—beginning, most

obviously, with the legacy of Franz Fanon. Dirk de Bruyn discusses Maya Deren's famous experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon*, along with her relation to Haitian voodoo, as presenting an alternative to the Western conception of female hysteria developed by Charcot, Breuer and Freud. Lee-Von Kim considers African-American artist Kara Walker's emphasis on the role of fantasy (including racist stereotypes) in imagining historical trauma. Kim sees influential figures like Caruth and Felman as failing to adequately address the role of visuality in trauma. Both Sarah Leggott and Anna Papaeti consider the impact of policies of reconciliation on public memory, in the cases of Spain and Cyprus respectively. Leggott looks at novels by Spanish women that challenge the official historical narrative imposed after the death of Franco. Papaeti discusses the opera *Manoli ... !* based on the events of the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Both consider the repressive nature of public policies of amnesty and the ways that art forms attempt to give voice to social trauma that has not been acknowledged. For de Bruyn and Kim trauma theory is culturally bound, but for Leggott and Papaeti trauma serves as a name for the legacies of political violence.

All these essays are about the politics of cultural memory and have quite different concerns from the next two sections which consider ethical questions surrounding news media and public health. Sue Joseph looks at issues for journalists covering trauma while Katrina Clifford considers the possibilities of 'vicarious trauma' for humanities researchers in this area. Pauline Diamond and Sallyanne Duncan consider the vulnerability of asylum seekers to the impact of negative media coverage and Anne Harris looks at racism in Australian schools. The essays in these sections overall show little interest in the more literary or philosophical explorations of Caruth or LaCapra. Journalists, in particular, tend to be concerned with the ethics surrounding PTSD sufferers and the responsibilities of news media to the potentially traumatic impact of their images and stories on both the public and professionals in the industry.

In the final section on cinema and mass media Lindsay Hallam looks at 'torture porn' in the context of the 'war on terror'. The notion of cultural trauma returns in Glenn Donnar's essay, which adopts Levinasian ethics to explore issues of representing other's suffering. By the end of the anthology this reader asks if cultural criticism needs to commit itself to a stronger conception of cultural or

historical trauma that is distinct from the ways that trauma is understood in psychotherapy. Many scholars have been drawn to the works of Caruth, Felman and LaCapra because they make trauma something difficult and even inaccessible, with the aura of a secret historical truth. While it is important to challenge the limitations of this earlier work, in much of the contemporary research included here trauma is understood as either a consequence of suffering or an historical event that has impacted a specific society. But in both these conceptions the complex and elusive work of memory that earlier trauma theory sought to elaborate becomes somewhat irrelevant. Future research will need to continue to ask hard questions about the role of trauma in cultural criticism if it is to remain a compelling interdisciplinary area and not an all inclusive term for a cultural studies preoccupied with catastrophe.

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¹ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2005.

² Kaplan; Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995; Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2003; Jill Bennett, *Empathetic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford University Press, Standford, 2005.