

believability of memories that might otherwise appear 'untrue' constitute important political moves. It is by means of trauma theory, suggests Walker, that the correspondences between film, recollection and event can be traced correspondences which are arguably foregrounded by the feminist autobiographical documentaries she discusses

The concept of correspondence returns us, once more, to Thomas Elsaesser's proposals concerning the interpretative methods suggested by trauma theory. Elsaesser's contribution invites consideration of the developments trauma theory might prompt in theories of referentiality, hermeneutics and interpretation while acknowledging that trauma might become too handy a catch-all. In opening up a debate on trauma and Screen Studies, my hope is that scholars will ask what trauma can illuminate whilst simultaneously bearing in mind the shadow it may cast over other theories, concepts and ideas no less valuable.

## Postmodernism as mourning work

THOMAS ELSAESSER

### Trauma theory

My interest in this topic has arisen from a renewed – or perhaps belated – re-reading of some of the key filmmakers of the so-called New German Cinema, an art cinema about which I wrote a book not centred on the famous auteurs.<sup>1</sup> I had always meant to follow it up with a study on some of the major directors, in the context of their relation to Germany's Nazi past. Chapters of this project have been published over the years on H J Syberberg, Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Herbert Achternbusch and Harun Farocki, and I have also published a book-length essay on Rainer Werner Fassbinder<sup>2</sup> In the latter, especially, I was concerned with the marking of the relation between Germans and Jews by the always deferred 'mourning work' of the German nation for the victims of the Holocaust I resumed the topic of mourning work in another context. A made-for-TV movie from 1997 about the 'Hot Autumn' of 1977 and the Red Army Faction showed how major shifts of memory and reversals of

1 Thomas Elsaesser *New German Cinema a History* (London and Basingstoke British Film Institute and Macmillan 1989)

2 Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany History Identity Subject* (Amsterdam Amsterdam University Press 1996)

3 Thomas Elsaesser 'Antigone Agonistes: urban guerilla or guerilla urbanism? The RAF, Germany in Autumn and Death Game', in Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin (eds), *Giving Ground: The Politics of Proximity* (London: Verso, 1999) pp. 267–302

4 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Melancolie et mimetisme: les enigmes d'Alexander Kluge', *Trafic* no. 31 (Autumn 1999), pp. 70–94

5 Susannah Radstone 'Screening trauma: *Forrest Gump*, film and memory', in *Memory and Methodology* (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2000)

6 See the essays in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (eds), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

speaking positions had given those traumatic events a quite different place in the nation's imaginary.<sup>3</sup> In 1998, the French film journal *Trafic* asked me for an article on Alexander Kluge, which revolves around the idea of 'absence as presence, presence as parapraxis'. I tried to track the deliberate slips in the work of a filmmaker who talks about everything under the sun, but who does his mourning work in silence.<sup>4</sup> What follows here are stray thoughts for an introductory chapter to a book that might bring these various efforts together. In order to mark my point of departure and cover some ground in mapping what to me has become a vast terrain, I shall be obliged to take some short cuts. The most egregious is my reference to something I call 'trauma theory' and which – confusingly – acts both as a launch-pad and a landing stage. It subsumes on the one hand the body of thought around the experience of Holocaust survivors, the clinical case histories around post-traumatic stress disorders and the public debates around the so-called 'memory wars' (recovered memory syndrome). On the other hand, it names and associates itself with an ongoing effort in the humanities – for me represented in paradigmatic fashion by the writings of Cathy Caruth and Susannah Radstone – to probe these divergent issues and cultural interventions analytically in order to put forward an important agenda for, respectively, literary theory and Film and Television Studies.

As Susannah Radstone has convincingly argued, trauma theory is the response, mainly in the academic community, to a number of deadlocks and aporias in the humanities.<sup>5</sup> For instance, it both redefines and challenges the use of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic tool for the interpretation of texts, and as a critical interventionist strategy for a politics of the body. Against the emphasis on fantasy in orthodox Freudian theory (as well as in *Screen* theory), trauma theorists want to stress memory and history. They want to articulate a theory of the subject not around desire and its constitutive lack (the Freud-Lacanian route), but around memory and its – politically enforced, patriarchally inflicted – gaps, absences and traceless traces. In its most general sense, this trauma theory is a theory of victimhood and a politics of blame, in which various ethnic, gender or sexual preference groups vie (sometimes with each other) for a place in the sun of righteous indignation (or lucrative litigation).<sup>6</sup>

In its more academically respectable form, trauma theory is trying to redefine important theoretical and political ground about the status of fantasy (once thought of as the motor of political action – the May 68 slogan of *l'imagination au pouvoir* – now the engine that drives consumerism) and the crisis of referentiality (in its Derridean articulation or in its neo-Platonic *Matrix* form). To the extent that this also implies the crisis of indexicality with regards to the photographic mode of the moving image, it is of both (high-) theoretical and (new media-) pragmatic interest to film scholars –

even to those not primarily concerned with film texts that represent military, genocidal or national-ethnic traumatic events.

Thus, on any account, the potential scope of trauma theory extends well beyond grappling with the Holocaust and its aftermath, as it figures, for instance, in my project around the New German Cinema mentioned above. In fact, the two may have very little in common. Or rather, both the persistence of the Holocaust debates in European cinema and the emergence of trauma theory in the international scholarly community are symptoms for which the causes may have to be sought elsewhere. Nonetheless, the notion of victimhood, the emphasis on history and power(lessness), the anxiety about memory, its ambiguous relation to an inner psychic reality and to an outer, public (or cinematic) representation, all tend to align trauma theory and the various post-World War II historical-political leftovers. Several distinct issues can be identified that the body of work I call trauma theory addresses in this conjuncture. They can give a sense of why trauma has become such an abiding concern also in the humanities as to necessitate the development of a new paradigm. Among these, I want to briefly touch on the complex trauma, trace and latency, the question of how to represent the unrepresentable, which to my mind seem to involve both the (psychic) temporality of belatedness and a different relation of narrative to (individual) agency. My final comments will try to situate these specific concerns in a broader hermeneutic perspective.

### Trauma, trace and latency: narrative and testimony

Since the issue of latency bears most directly on the Holocaust (it suggests that traumatic events – traumatic both for specific individuals as well as for a culture's understanding of itself – involve a so-called 'latency' period), I shall not comment on it further, except to refer to another essay of mine,<sup>7</sup> where I try to show across a number of films, such as Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* (1984), Claude Lanzman's *Shoah* (1985) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), that accepting the latency hypothesis as significant for filmmaking almost necessitates a theory of trauma, in order to understand the nature of the delays (the displacements of an event and its representation) and to be able to pose the question: why this or that film *now*?

What emerges is that trauma's non-representability is both subjective (trauma makes failure of memory significant) and objective (trauma makes of representation a significant failure), confirming that traumatic events for contemporary culture turn around the question of how to represent the unrepresentable, or how – in Samuel Beckett's words – to name the unnamable. This has been the traditional 'literary' response ('poetry after Auschwitz is

7 Thomas Elsaesser 'Subject positions speaking positions from *Holocaust Our Hitler* and *Heimat*, to *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*', in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History* (New York and London Routledge 1996) pp 145–86

8 The phrase alludes to Saul Friedlander *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1992)

9 Cathy Caruth *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1996)

10 On the issue of recovered memory syndrome and the debate about post-traumatic stress disorder, see Antze and Lambek (eds) *Tense Past*. I found their Introduction, and Ian Hacking *Memory sciences: memory politics*, to be especially illuminating

barbaric') and to some extent, has also underpinned the *Bilderverbot* with respect to films, especially narrative fiction films. But here, trauma theory might be seen to break the traditional deadlock around the 'limits of representation',<sup>8</sup> opening up a new space of theoretical displacement. Caruth's work, for instance, has a different take on the question of representation, arguing (for instance, in her chapters on *Hiroshima mon Amour* and Heinrich von Kleist) in post-Paul de Mannian, deconstructive fashion, that if trauma is the name of an event that does not leave visible traces, these non-traces are nonetheless recoverable by a different kind of hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup>

Caruth reminds us that in Freud, for instance, latency is above all connected to infantile sexuality and involves two scenes. The first is 'sexual in content' but is not given 'sexual meaning', the second is 'non-sexual in content' but has sexual meaning.<sup>10</sup> But apart from raising questions of power and the collusive or latent violence of the family bond, trauma theory in this area also addresses a shift of perception and meaning, which makes trauma something not assimilated, an experience not integrated into the psychic economy of a subject. Caruth can therefore argue that the overcoming or mastery of trauma must involve processes of 'integration' and 'assimilation'. Foremost among these processes (or 'techniques') of integration would be narrative and the ability to tell a (one's) story, where the narrator is fully present to him- or herself in the act of telling. This gives to trauma theory a double set of objectives, but also of historical tasks. On the one hand, it opens up trauma theory to the experience and memory of events other than public-historical ones, as in personal memoirs, autobiography, testimony or family history. On the other hand, it defines traumas such as the Vietnam War or ethnic cleansing in the Balkans as an issue of narrative – of telling and listening – within the terms of which its relation to subjectivity, history and memory can best be addressed.

It is here that the media, and in particular television, have played an especially outstanding but also controversial role. In the format of the talk show, television has shaped an entire culture of confession and witnessing, of exposure and self-exposure, which in many ways – good and bad – seems to have taken over from both religion and the welfare state. In a sense, it has made trauma theory the recto, and therapeutic television (also disparagingly called trash TV) the verso of democracy's failure to 'represent' its citizens' personal concern in the public sphere. It also points up the credibility gap of much Judaeo-Christian religion when it comes to sustain as 'healing' the rituals of mediation that used to insert the private into the symbolic order.

At the same time, a similar failure of mediation between subjectivity and history has also given birth to an entirely different film culture, which especially, but not only, in Europe has transformed the way history is represented in the cinema. Films –

some mainstream, some produced with and for television – have proved to be a most extraordinary instrument for giving shape, texture and voice to a ‘history from below’ or ‘everyday history’, at once authenticating ‘lived experience’ through the power of immediacy inherent in the moving image, and demonstrating the cinema’s capacity to ‘fake’ such authenticity through the stylistic-narrational techniques of editing sounds and images. This double role has ‘traumatized’ both documentary and feature filmmaking – well before the advent of the digital image gave it a further twist, confirming the now definitively ‘traumatic’ status of the moving image in our culture as the symptom without a cause, as the event without a trace

### Temporality and belatedness

Linking trauma to latency and narrative extends its scope beyond the sexual, to include as one of its key features temporality, or rather the difference between psychic temporality and linear chronological time. Trauma theory would here be concerned with the rival claims of memory time and historical time, and their respective relation to perception, to self-awareness and the subjectivity of media-experience ‘Trauma’ thus not only names the delay between an event and its (persistent, obsessive) return, but also a reversal of affect and meaning across this gap in time.<sup>11</sup> The thrill of equivocation (part of its spectacle value) derives from a cognitive-emotive hesitancy, which can be phrased theoretically does the recurrent, repetitive aspect of the media’s treatment of (historic, public, shocking) events relate to the obsessive time of (subjective) trauma-memory, or is obsessive repetition in fact the media’s (and popular culture’s) most ‘authentic’ temporality and time-regime? If the latter, then repetition becomes part of creating in the spectator not just ‘prosthetic memory’ but prosthetic trauma, deliberately or inadvertently setting up a gap between the (visual, somatic) impact of an event or image and the (the media’s) ability to make sense of it, in order to make it enter into the order of the comprehensible and translating it into discourse. In a sense, and perhaps most intriguingly for the literary or film scholar, trauma theory puts at issue the temporality of the traumatic event. Besides involving repetition and iteration, the traumatic event intimately links several temporalities, making them coexist within the same perceptual or somatic field, so much so that the very distinction between psychic time and chronological time seems suspended.

This is why another Freudian concept, having to do with shifts in temporality and space, has often been associated with trauma, namely Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, usually translated as belatedness, or deferred action. As Caruth writes. ‘Trauma is fully evident only in

11 See Radstone, ‘Screening trauma’

- 12 Cathy Caruth (ed.) *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore MD Johns Hopkins University Press 1992), p. 8

connection with another place and another time. Belatedness neither inside nor outside, neither one place nor one time'<sup>12</sup> Yet *Nachtraglichkeit* is itself an aspect of a wider epistemological issue, the subject's need to invoke – or invent – an origin or absent cause in order to explain how one knows what one knows, in relation to an event or a course of action, but also in relation to the subject's self-awareness of his or her identity. It is in this sense that Lacan speaks of the *après-coup* as the act of the subject filling a void or a gap in his/her identity, by providing a causal-chronological sequence or a chain of signifiers, to assure him/herself of a spatio-temporal consistency and a place in the symbolic order.

In this respect, trauma theory revives debates around the definition of subjectivity and history. What contemporary trauma theory tries to re-think is the relation of subjectivity to history, across the act of narration, in which witnessing and personal testimony are in some sense both crucial and highly problematic. Crucial in that participants, especially in the 'memory wars', are often embroiled in wanting to claim: 'My (act of) testimony is my truth, my bearing of witness is my claim to both truth and to the terms of my experience'. Problematic, in that such a truth is specific and local, but it may lack narratives. Or it may lack witnesses who corroborate my truth, there may be no confessors or narratees, no-one to listen. In this sense, the dilemma of the Holocaust witness becomes paradigmatic but also historically unique, that is, it would be the limit case of more recent (and some would argue, more banal) instances of personal witnessing and story-telling. But television talk shows and media confessions (with their implied invocation of an [absent] third party) insist, be it in the idiom of popular culture and commerce, on the changing dynamics of social subjectivity and citizenship in the media age. To relate this kind of witnessing to trauma is also to establish a link between public event and private impact, across body and voice as instruments of an (incomplete) inscription of this subjectivity.

In the face of technological changes in our recording media and communication systems, forms of cultural memory and intersubjectivity are emerging (though they are by no means caused by them, unless the crises of the symbolic order mentioned earlier are regarded as technological in origin!) for which chronological time-frames and geographical co-ordinates are inappropriate.<sup>13</sup> But to the degree that the culture is generating and circulating new forms of media memory, the subject 'invents' or invokes temporal and spatial markers (for example, the shifters 'now' and 'me') for her/his own memory, body-based and somatic, which is to say, she/he fantasizes history in the form of trauma. Or, to put it slightly differently, the contemporary subject will have a necessarily traumatic (because lacunary, incomplete, narratively no longer sanctioned) relation to history and memory: in the first instance to her/his own history, but

- 13 See the old French phrase 'Up to 1919 it's history, from 1919 to 1945 it's geography, and since 1945 it's politics' quoted by Pierre Vidal-Naquet in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture and 'the Jewish Question' in France* (New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 28

more generally, to all history Trauma may here be (merely) the name of a particular contemporary subject-effect, as individuals (or groups) try to re-inscribe themselves into the different kinds of media-memory, thus highlighting their deficit as agents in their own life history

It is partly because of these latter anxieties that trauma therapy and psychoanalytic trauma theory has captured the attention of literary scholars such as Caruth, or of film theorists and media scholars For what makes trauma different from more traditional issues of representation (for instance, of how 'accurate' or 'truthful' a film is in relation to the history or event it is purporting to depict) is the idea that trauma also suspends the categories of true and false, being in some sense performative This is important in that, first of all, it casts doubt on the telos of one aspect of trauma theory (that the goal is 'narrative integration' or assimilation of 'the facts'). More generally, it allows the discussion to move beyond the usual therapeutic categories, be they poetological (Aristotle's 'catharsis' and 'anagnorisis') or Freudian ('acting out' and 'working through') But if trauma belongs to the category of the performative (the symptom speaks its subject's body), it is nonetheless a special case one would have to invent the category of the 'negative performative', because trauma affects the texture of experience by the apparent absence of traces Also, if trauma involves an 'event that precludes registration',<sup>14</sup> even the category of witnessing (including its pop-cultural ones of 'confession' and 'outing') collapses in the face of its inaccessibility even to the subject, quite apart from its non-representability If trauma is experienced through its forgetting, its repeated forgetting, then, paradoxically, one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of it. This can present an especially distressing and self-doubting task for the subject having to come to terms with it, but it is also a daunting (and, dare one say, irresistible) challenge for the interpretant and analyst, since trauma potentially suspends the normal categories of story-telling, making it necessary that we revise our traditional accounts of narrative and narration<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, trauma theory raises questions such as the separation of body and voice, of representation and its material supports

14 Doni Laub in Caruth (ed.)  
*Trauma Explorations in Memory*

15 Sensing this Caruth expands on Freud's definition by arguing that to suffer from trauma is to be possessed or inhabited by an event which can also be an image In which case crucial to both contexts are questions of agency and authority but also of embodiment and spatial orientation such as active and passive or inside and out Caruth  
*Unclaimed Experience* p 5

### The traceless text, but not *hors-texte*

What makes this account of the 'negative performative' an alternative to the 'repression model' is not only that trauma would no longer be a (version of the) return of the repressed. It would give the traumatic event the status of a (suspended) origin in the production of a representation, a discourse or a text, bracketed or suspended because marked by the absence of traces. The consequence of such a theory

of trauma is that it is not the event itself nor its distortion but its structure that is of chief interest. Belated, possessing but non-possessed, somatic but without visible signs (now that Freud's 'conversion' disorders, such as hysteria, have become virtually extinct), marked by deferral, unpredictability and incomplete knowledge, it is at once 'real' and 'spectral', 'historical' and 'virtual'. Hence also the affinity between trauma and fetish ('nothing there'), which in turn implies a disjuncture between seeing and knowing. As such, it turns on a crisis of perception – though one no longer explained solely within the Freudian-Lacanian model of disavowal (and *Screen* theory's gaze), because it would take in also Benjamin's reflections on perception and shock, with allegory as the preferred hermeneutics of the shock experience.

Trauma theory is thus also related to 'modernity', or rather, it replies to the fact that postmodernism has proved to be untheorizable. It is as if trauma theory appears 'behind' post-modernity, charting its political blockages (both critically and negatively), implicitly acknowledging but no longer having to regret, for instance, the fact that the grand narratives have been exhausted, including the grand narrative of the Holocaust, which has been seen as both the last of the grand narratives<sup>16</sup> and the very epitome of the impossibility of grand narratives.<sup>17</sup> A citation from Caruth seems to hint at this connection: 'history occurs in the form of a symptom. Trauma is the name for an impossible history, or the name for the impossibility of history as narrative, as an ordered sequence of events, of agents as subjects, as chronology, as cause and effect, as rationality or purposiveness of actions.'<sup>18</sup>

If this is so, then what I have called the historical leftovers of the twentieth century act themselves like trauma theory's screen memories, since they cover for another philosophical debate, of which trauma theory is both part, and from which it tries to extricate itself. I am referring to deconstruction and its relation to history and referentiality. The question (especially acute perhaps since the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) has become how to place history discursively, but without 'falling' into any crudely nominalist and realist positions or merely analyzing it across narrative and rhetorical tropes. Hence the emphasis on temporality and spatiality, but 'displaced' in relation to the event: 'trauma' would then be the name for a referentiality that can no longer be placed (that need no longer be placed) in a particular time or place, but whose time-space-place-referentiality is nonetheless posited, in fact, doubled and displaced in relation to an 'event'. That this could be of interest to film theorists, meditating on the special-effects blockbuster or event-movie, and might be suggestive to television scholars trying to get a handle on the facts-fantasies-and-fictions surrounding a media event like the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, is both evident and needs to be argued in a much longer paper.

16 Jean Baudrillard *Holocaust*  
*Cahiers du cinéma* no. 302 (July-August 1979)

17 Jean-François Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition*  
(Minneapolis, MI: Minnesota University Press, 1988)

18 Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 7

In short, the dangers are obvious: trauma theory is both necessary, and it could become too handy a catch-all for resolving the aporias or lacunae of previous theoretical configurations in the field of film and television studies, whereas its more challenging task is to think through the deadlocks of deconstruction in relation to extra-textuality and interpretation, as well as rethinking the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis. Extending it in this direction, trauma theory would be called upon to rescue interpretation and hermeneutics from the relativism of 'there is no *hors-texte*', from the fundamentalism of the 'authentic experience' but also from the (cynical) tyranny of the 'performative', since trauma poses the enigma of interpretation as a negative performative, while referring to a historicity and a temporality that acknowledges (deconstruction's) deferral and (psychoanalysis's) double time of *Nachträglichkeit*. In which case, trauma theory is not so much a theory of recovered memory as it is one of recovered referentiality. Such referentiality, however, can only be recovered through interpretation, because as Gertrude Stein might have said, there is no there there. Yet if we can accept that 'postmodernism' may well have been cultural theory's mourning work for the second half of the twentieth century, then the hermeneutic historian will most certainly hope that 'where nothing is (and everything goes), there shall trauma be'.

## Melodrama, cinema and trauma

### E. ANN KAPLAN

Originating in the 1970s and 1980s, theories of melodrama in Film Studies have tended to fall into two main groups: those (largely by male critics) focusing on the origins of the genre in the bourgeois family and class struggle, and those by feminists stressing the genre's address to white female viewers' sufferings and frustrations within the patriarchal codes of the middle-class family in the West. More recently, theorists such as Christine Gledhill have sought to combine these theoretical approaches in a useful way.<sup>1</sup> But approaching the genre from the perspective of trauma theory highlights gaps in theorizing about melodrama, and may throw light on the processes of theorizing itself.

<sup>1</sup> In her introduction to *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987) Christine Gledhill stresses Peter Brooks's list of forces acting on the bourgeoisie, including the refiguring of Good and Evil in human life, demonstration of conflicting unconscious forces in the psyche, and confrontation with the limits of language and the decentred subject exposed by modernism (p. 31).