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Scoping Trauma

The following introductory remarks reflect the discrete observations of the editorial panel. We thought it appropriate to signal this at the outset as, rather than offering a univocal convergence of positions, we have opted for a style that allows for our differing views to be heard. Where our positions connect will be evident, we hope, in the brief prefatory remarks that comprise our editorial positions.

This issue of IM has been organised around the challenging contemporary topic, 'trauma', and offers an intriguing range of insights into arguably one of the most disturbing – and until recently least understood – facets of human experience. A psychiatric as opposed to a medical definition of trauma is traditionally understood as a type of extremely painful and distressing emotional experience that should be avoided or, if it occurs, should have its long-term deleterious effects minimised through appropriate therapy, medication or drug regimes. Its etymology is the Greek word for "a wound" which captures its standard interpretation as injurious. As one of the editors of this journal indicates, the discursive history of the word found its most profound (if contentious) utterance in the writings of Sigmund Freud in the last century even if today his thoughts are often relegated to the fringes of philosophical or psychological discussions on the subject.

We are still in the process of making theoretical distinctions in this complex and relatively uncharted field and it is useful, I think, to consider an exception to such standard evaluations of the wounding effect of psychiatric trauma. This sometimes occurs in cases within the creative domain (the documentary, for example, the performance piece or the feature film) where the trauma is occasioned through an act of voluntary submission, on the part of the audience/viewer (sufferer), with the strategic aim of some form of redemption. When this happens, I refer to such voluntary submission to this type of violence enacted upon a person's emotional and affective states as *acquiescent traumatisation*. The use of the term "trauma" in this sense is not intended to suggest that the degree of physical violence which results in medical trauma is conceptually unimportant; it clearly is: but as critics, readers and audiences it needs to be made clear that *acquiescent traumatisation* shares conceptual affinities with extreme examples of painful emotional experiences that are worth drawing out, especially in theorising the special aesthetic and moral dimensions of certain creative genres.

A pertinent question one might ask of creative works, generally, is why one should *choose* to go and see savage and emotionally wrenching depictions of human agony. The answer, I suggest, is that such works can impact on an individual's way of being in the world, significantly changing, as a direct result of the traumatic confrontation, the audience/viewer (sufferer's) values or central beliefs. At their best such changes take on an illuminatory function shifting perceptions and understandings empathetically in an emancipatory direction. The relevant beliefs or values of the viewer, when confronted by works of this nature, are challenged to undergo change as a result of the violently shifted perspective occasioned by the observed trauma. The trauma should therefore constitute a state of affairs

that justifies a re-evaluation by the suffering agent of previously held beliefs in order to re-establish an internal consistency within the subject's trauma-torn field of beliefs. The direction of the semiotic alignment needs to run from the traumatic state to the belief. The realisation or insight occasioned by the trauma should be grounded by the cognitive template that imbues the trauma with significance. We are dealing here with a tripartite relationship. A field of semantic production (such as a documentary, feature film, performance piece or narrative comprises) intentionally encodes the trauma it aims at producing in the acquiescent receiver so as to influence the relevant shape of the epistemic response appropriate to the traumatic intent. Hence the controlled production, the resultant traumatic experience, followed by the appropriate epistemic alteration renders the encounter significant, where the significance qualifies as emancipatory. At the core of this emotional transaction lies a gift of trust that the audience proffers the creative artist. As is always the case with trust it is open to abuse. Horror movies may generate a quasi-pornographic experience which in many cases attenuates sensitivities so that the role of trauma here degenerates, when effective, into something akin to a voyeuristic participation by the viewer in the depicted trauma of another constituting an end in itself. It is the absence of the (possibly) morally ordered tripartite relationship that renders such coarsening consequences demeaning in the literal sense of meaning reduction. Trust offered with its concomitant vulnerabilities constitutes one term of a moral transaction which needs to be matched on the part of the writer, director or producer with a reciprocal commitment to a high moral seriousness. Where the resultant relationship between the creator of the work and the viewer/audience (sufferer) involves the traumatic dimension occasioned by material of the kind interrogated in this issue, the nature of the intimate moral pact holding between them is accentuated. What is offered by the viewer/audience is a committed preparedness to allow their moral intelligence to be schooled by a dramatically inflicted emotional violence on the condition that a deepened human sensitivity is promised. It becomes in effect a *trial by ordeal* that genuinely aims at the moral enlargement of the participating psyche.

If these tripartite epistemic linkages were not to hold, then while the resultant trauma could be said to be the causal occasion of a state change, it could not be said to contribute in any substantial way to the fulfilment of a redemptive function. This follows from the state's non-propositional status. Thus to acquiesce out of a masochistic motivation to undergoing traumatisation would empty the traumatic experience of any emancipatory epistemic impact: the trauma would be emptied of its intentionality. The direction of alignment towards a way of being defined as essentially painful from a belief that such a state of affairs will cause masochistic pleasure denies any epistemic role to the acquiescent traumatisation itself. Such a role requires an implicit appeal to a standard of cognitive assessment against which the traumatised state needs to be measured if its emancipatory programme is to be acknowledged. Chosen as an end in itself for its masochistic gain, any resultant trauma is denied a morally signifiatory function.

We need to distinguish, then, what I call *acquiescent traumatisation* from both *vicarious traumatisation* and *secondary traumatic stress*.¹ Vicarious traumatisation refers to the effect on caregivers who work with traumatised patients and who as a result of such involvement develop "...disruptions in the clinician's own cognitive schema..." (Hudeck, 95) where these disturbances range from heightened feelings of vulnerability and extreme feelings of helplessness to chronic alienation. Secondary traumatic stress concerns issues centred round emotional duress as experienced by close family members of the trauma survivor. These cognate dimensions of trauma colour all three categories of remote second person trauma affects. What needs to be distinguished is that such collateral wounding affects in the latter two categories are correctly treated as negative consequences of exposure to the primary trauma victim and require their own healing therapies. My notion of acquiescent traumatisation insists that the experienced traumatic stress, undertaken voluntarily, must be conceptualised as positive for the primary traumatised agent (the individual viewers or audience members), as the purported original trauma is not so much experienced as enacted if, for example, it is a stage performance or a representation in a feature film. Stanislavskian trained performers *may* experience the negative consequences of secondary traumatic stress as was reputedly experienced recently by Heath Ledger's 2008 portrayal of the 'Joker' in *The Dark Knight*. However, acquiescent traumatisation remains distinctive, I would argue, in its positive therapeutic function as a bridge to a deepened empathy and moral wisdom. It could be argued that art necessarily aestheticises dramatically presented suffering. I think

this is possible but the *noumenal* reality of suffering can only be apprehended within the constraints of a dramatically realised meaning field structuring the *phenomenal* world. Wittgenstein's final injunction in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* proposition 7: "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen." holds equally in the presented world of the documentary, the feature film or the dramatic work of art. No one really believes we can confront – unmediated - the naked reality of the world's massed suffering.

Jenny de Reuck

¹ Here I am drawing on Catherine Hudeck's article, "Dealing with Vicarious Traumatization in the Context of Global Fear", *The Folio*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2007. 95-101

Explorations of trauma as a psychological and cultural phenomenon have a long history. Within the humanities and creative arts, Freudian psychology remains the dominant discourse, despite most western psycho-social, clinical and therapeutic services adopting cognitive, neurobiological and other techniques and mechanisms to heal, if not cure, manifest traumatic effects.

This special issue of *IM* on Trauma immediately follows the December 2008 international conference in Perth: *Interrogating Trauma: Arts & Media Responses to Collective Suffering*, held at Murdoch and Curtin universities, and part-sponsored by the National Academy of Screen & Sound, home to the *IM* Journal. The conference, and this theme issue of *IM*, addresses many of the praxiological concerns of artists, curators and media-makers in response to suffering, but also in reaction to currencies of methodologies circulating globally within trauma scholarship.

As Susannah Radstone has suggested, the danger for humanities-based research into trauma is its mostly unproblematic adoption of a Freudian grand-narrative at the expense of many others, alongside the privileging of one form of (frequently western, first world) mass trauma over others. The tendency to homogenise and canonise universalist approaches needs to be reconsidered, especially in relation to calls to cement the 'filed' of trauma studies as a unique discipline, jockeying for recognition alongside proliferate others (memory studies, Holocaust studies, genocide studies) with sub-fields such as Dark Tourism and Disaster.

To be sure, there is already a firmly established Trauma Industry in the humanities and creative arts, just as there is within the medical, psychological and social services. Artistic and scholarly approaches in this evolving and shifting discipline should first, following Hippocrates, 'do no harm'. Scholars and artists must be cognisant of their ethical positions, particularly where their work and interventions have the significant potential to re-traumatise. Similarly, and potentially paradoxically, those of us in the humanities and creative arts have a responsibility to challenge orthodoxies and deconstruct paradigms, especially where these may be ineffective or moribund. Such work should nevertheless be undertaken with sensitivity and empathy. But as Janet Walker has suggested, those of us encountering trauma, and who struggle with its mediation, need to be self-critically aware of our tendency to sacralise the topic and the victims, and not avoid difficult questions that may cause confusion or offense. We need, according to Walker, to explore nuance and gradation in the often socially and politically constructed binary divisions of victim/perpetrator or sufferer/aggressor.

The essays collected here in this theme issue, each in their own way, reflect on diverse methodologies in approaching trauma. The supervisory praxis within the tertiary education sector is examined in the contribution by Josko Petkovic with Owen Beck. Dirk deBruyn considers performance in his experimental, autobiographical screen work. Sarah Rossetti demonstrates how critical theory can inform, even if only recognized retrospectively, the craft work of scriptwriting and filmmaking. My own essay explores the possibilities of enhancing visual media representation by embracing the aural, spatial and phenomenological for trauma work. Paul Arthur considers the online world of social networking and cybershrines, as a new mode of communicating trauma. Antonio Traverso looks to Chilean cinema from a national perspective to understand oppressive political violence and its affect.

Each of these works seeks to extend the discourses and mediations in relation to trauma and

suffering.

Mick Broderick

This Trauma issue of IM is predictably full of traumas. In part this is because, there is no shortage of discourses dealing with traumas in the world today. The list is endless. There are small traumas and astronomical traumas, accidental traumas, Nature caused traumas and crime traumas, personal traumas and past traumas – ancient traumas, imagined traumas. Some traumas are fashionable and others are not. Some traumas are condemned and others are glorified with musical and marching bands. There are so many things that one can do with traumas: traumas are endured, remembered, repressed, recalled and represented, debriefed; traumas are commemorated, inscribed, produced and reproduced. With all this talk of traumas it is easily be convinced that life and trauma go together in a way that life and death go together. Freud thought as much with his Eros/ Thanatos combination of instincts. For him our entire existence as specie consisted of layers and layers of traumas, each layer with its own trauma-scar. So much so that everything we are and have become – including our bodies, our consciousness and our language – can be considered as only another evolutionary trauma-scar layer protecting our inner core. If hypothetically one could peel back these scars of life, layer after layer, eon after eon, we could again return to that Promised Land of non-existence and Nothingness where there are no traumas and only bliss reigns.

Aceh Mon Amour: Supervising Otakes up this line of argument and speculates that creative artists often seek out this universal road to Nirvana and that, contrary to the common connotations of trauma, this atavistic version of trauma may well be a positive source of creativity.

Pixelated Memory: Online Commemoration of Trauma and Crisis describes global cyber-communities that have arisen from people wanting to share their personal traumas. The author leaves us wondering if the inhabitants of this cyber community suffer from a compulsion to repeat the trauma or if this cyber-reunion offers some kind of therapeutic resolution to the traumatic experience – or both.

We have four articles that are concerned with representations of traumas. When we represent trauma we cannot help but reproduce some of its element, something that perturbs our breath as in ***Waiting to Exhale: Somatic Responses to Place and the Genocidal Sublime***, or something that fragments and divides the trauma throughout one's being as in ***Dys-membering Trauma A Dream***. But how can one give force to these representations of trauma without traumatizing the viewer all over again. ***Contemporary Chilean Cinema and Traumatic Memory*** gives specific cinematic examples of cinematic and implied trauma in the films *Machuca* and *Le domaine perdu*. In a similar vein ***Enigmatic Pearl***, and ***Waiting to Exhale*** both argue that concept of the sublime – a conjoined mixture of pleasure and pain – may be one way by which this can be done. Trauma in this perspective is best represented by something that is painfully beautiful.

One should also note in this editorial something that is, regrettably, absent from this journal issue. No article direct itself to the possibility that some traumas are manufactured or at least massaged until they reach a hysterical crescendo. No article addressed the notion that representations of trauma can have a coercive as well as personal dimension. There is indeed an industry of traumas out there that has many of us traumatized to the point of terror: the sky will fall in tomorrow, the earth will open up and swallow us, the market will plummet and genocidal terrorist will get us with weapons of mass destruction. Many of us are suffering from posttraumatic syndrome arising from traumas that are yet to happen. In this perspective terror and trauma go together. None of these terror-traumas is innocent; they all have a function in the greater order of things. We need a journal issue that looks at the fashion of traumas and how the powerful use the discourse of trauma to make us pliant. In short, we need *The History of Trauma* Volume 1. While we wait for this journal issue we should remember that one does not need to be hit by an asteroid to be devastated. Often a single word invoking one's race, gender, ethnicity, class, employment and health status can do the job just as well and arguably more efficiently.

We also did not get any papers which explicitly implore us to forget traumas. This is potentially regrettable as those that bear witness to traumatic events, those that remember traumas too readily are often the first to perpetrate traumas on others – with sublime and

pleasurable passion. The gunners on Sarajevo hilltops were no doubt remembering with most beautiful anguish the trauma perpetrated upon their kinfolks seven hundred long years ago. What memory! There are poems, songs and psalms that recalled these traumatic events and that bare witness to them with sublime beauty. Atavistic traumas gush forth like a flood with so many national anthems. They get you in the belly each time you hear the tune: Anzac, Gallipoli, memorials, parades, mateship at Dawn, blood on the wattle... The soldiers on the Sarajevo hilltops must have recalled the same kind of poignant nostalgia as they kept firing more and more artillery shells on the women and children in the market place below. Something similar can be said of American Neocons who organized the Shock and Awe bombing of Iraq. It is possible to imagine each traumatic bomb-blast as an orgasmic package of cathartic memory climaxing some recycled and market drive trauma. The Middle East, in particular, is a place where murderous, sublime and passionate memories go back millennia and seem to justify ever-greater acts of inhumanity. Why is it that we cannot commemorate traumas with something as simple as a soccer game as did children of Aceh in the aftermath of the tsunami's devastation? Why is it that we don't commemorate traumas with Life and not with hatred of Life?

We did not get any papers telling us explicitly to forget Hiroshima, or to forget the Holocaust. And yet this was always the foremost message Marguerite Duras wanted to give us in the much quoted *Mon Amour*: Love thy German, Jewish, Palestinian and Hutu enemy all night long. Keep them in bed and don't let them go to war.

Josko Petkovic