

Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor

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I

The belated construction of the Holocaust as the central event of the 20th century is inextricably linked to the rise of trauma as one of the key interpretive categories of contemporary politics and culture. In a surprisingly multidisciplinary effort experts from many academic disciplines and professions have studied the long-term effects of warfare and genocide that have played such an important role in the history of the 20th century. In the course of such efforts representatives of different intellectual and epistemological traditions, who otherwise hardly agree on the status of reality and science, have come to embrace the concept of trauma as the sign of our times. But despite the many good intentions involved in the belated recognition of the dire consequences of human-made catastrophes, the rise of trauma into the position of dominant research paradigm and popular cultural metaphor has also had some unfortunate side effects. As more and more proponents of trauma research left behind the concern with the concrete psychological dynamics set into motion by historical events like the “Final Solution” and the Vietnam War and turned trauma into a widely employed conceptual tool, they tended to obliterate the very historical precision and moral specificity that the concept had originally helped to establish. Consequently, as a result of their very success, dominant schools of thought in trauma research tend to conflate the traumatic and non-traumatic, the exceptional and the everyday, and even obfuscate the essential difference between the victims and perpetrators of extreme violence.

This essay does not provide a genealogy of the psychological concept of trauma, a task which has been undertaken by Ruth Leys in compelling fashion.¹ Instead, we will reconstruct key turning points in the history of philosophy of Holocaust interpretation and take a close look at the relatively new concept of cultural trauma, which builds on this philosophical tradition. That critical task will lead us from the writings of Theodor Adorno and Jean-François Lyotard to the recent publications of literary theorists and cultural studies experts like Cathy Caruth and Kirby Farrell. The texts of Caruth, Farrell, and others do not directly engage with the historical events of the “Final Solution” but they provide a first attempt of a truly interdisciplinary trauma research that combines philosophical and psychological traditions in an effort to craft the concept of cultural trauma. Unfortunately, the growing body of work has created an aestheticized, morally and politically imprecise concept of cultural trauma, which provides little insight into the social and cultural repercussions of historical traumata. This problem arises from the construction of a misleading symbolic equivalency between the allegedly traumatic component of all human communication and the concrete suffering of victims of physical and mental trauma. By equating these two disparate problems of representation -- the inextinguishable relativism in all matters of representation, on the one hand, and the vexing problems of memory and identity encountered by survivors of trauma, on the other --, the proponents of the cultural trauma paradigm elide the moral differences between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of acts of violence. In addition, the concept of cultural trauma is not very well suited to explain the social and psychological dynamics set in motion by cultural representations of trauma and violence. Both shortcomings, the referential-ethical and the psychological, become quite obvious when the concept is measured against the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust among its

¹ Leys 2000, see also the helpful discussions in Young 1995 and Lerner/Micale 2001.

survivors and the non-traumatic effects of representations of violence, including representation of the Holocaust, which play such an important role in our popular culture. In the end we are left with a strange phenomenon: an interdisciplinary research trajectory gone astray which has neither the rigor and vision nor the precision and social relevance of the two independent traditions of trauma research which it tried to integrate and bring to bear on each other. Consequently, after an explanation and critique of the concept of cultural trauma we will seek promising venues for replacing it with more precise and more practical conceptual tools for the analysis of the representations of violence and their social consequences.

It is difficult to resist the considerable gravitational pull of the trauma paradigm and develop categories of emotional-psychological engagement and disengagement that are more subtle and precise than the robust notion of trauma. But in the course of our analysis it will become clear that this task represents an important gap in the literature about the legacy of traumatic events. We need psychological concepts for the analysis of processes of social and cultural transmission which address the reproduction of power and violence but which avoid the moral and existential excess of the trauma claim. Such ‘low-intensity’ concepts help us better understand our emotional engagement and investment in violence and let us map out the vast, uncharted psychological territory that lies between the experience of extreme trauma on the one hand and the much more frequent encounter with representations of violence on the other hand. With improved conceptual precision we can differentiate between trauma and the culture of trauma, or, put differently, between trauma and entertainment.

II

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno belong to the very small group of intellectuals who

addressed the legacy of the “Final Solution” in their postwar writings (Traverso 2000, Kuhlmann 1997). Adorno, in particular, reminded his compatriots persistently about their historic guilt and never failed to admonish them for the insufficient attempts of dealing with the burden of the past (for instance Adorno 1977). But even Adorno’s interventions, as exceptional as they were in the postwar environment, were based on a very general conception of guilt and an ambivalent philo-Semitism.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s first full-fledged interpretation of Nazism, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, was written during the war without full knowledge of the facts of the Holocaust (Adorno/Horkheimer 1988). The collaborative work is an impressive exercise in historical anthropology, which marks an important departure from the more conventionally Marxist and psychoanalytically informed prewar writings of its authors. By telescoping all of history Horkheimer and Adorno used the catastrophe of the Third Reich to explain the fundamental principles of human existence. According to their analysis the crimes of the Nazi regime resulted from a basic construction error of human culture which dates back to prehistory.

The anthropological model outlined in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* divides history into four different eras characterized by different mimetic strategies that humankind employed to safeguard its survival. Through the stages of animalism, magic, myth, and enlightenment human beings developed more and more successful tools of representation and manipulation which allowed them to contain their fear of nature and ultimately dominate nature in increasingly efficient ways, leading all the way to modern science (Adorno/Horkheimer 1988, 9-17). But the success story of human self-preservation, which reached its climax in the ideology of enlightenment, represents only one side of the equation. As Adorno and Horkheimer explain with much drama and hyperbole, the fateful separation and interaction between culture and

nature, subject and object caused the seemingly autonomous individual to turn its power over nature against itself and undermine the very foundation of its existence. As a result, every step on the way towards increasing control over nature through abstraction and categorization entailed a commensurate repression of those elements of human nature, which do not correspond to the rigid system of instrumental reason. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the Nazi concentration camps simply highlight this self-destructive dynamic at the core of Western civilization (Adorno/Horkheimer 1988, 185-187).

Already in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, but especially in Adorno's subsequent writings, the sweeping indictment of Western history and culture is combined with a radical self-critical edge. In thinking their critique to its radical conclusion, Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that the dynamic of misrepresentation, which governs human history, also undermines the integrity of their own position. They realize that their own rational analysis of the triumph of instrumental reason remains inextricably linked to the impenetrable fabric of power, guilt, and representation, which they are trying to uncover. This dilemma explains the rhetorical structure of the book with its many fragments, exaggerations, and contradictions (van der Brink 1997). By destabilizing their own critique Adorno and Horkheimer try to suspend the smooth reproduction of power and reconnect, however temporarily, with archaic modes of representation which still retain an element of respect for the incommensurability between object and language. This rhetorical gesture is perfected in Adorno's strategy of thinking in negative dialectics which led to such beautiful, self-serving, and self-defeating statements as the following: "If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true – if it is to be true today, in any case – it must also be thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the

musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of the victims.”²

One might be tempted to side with Adorno against Adorno and conclude that his practice of negative dialectics is still not radical enough. His texts, and perhaps also their author, seem inappropriately preoccupied with their own quotation value and in that sense partake in the distasteful enterprise of squeezing sense out of the victims’ fate, as Adorno put it on one occasion (Adorno 1990, 361). Furthermore and more important, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno’s other interpretations of Auschwitz raise two specific problems which mark them as intellectual products of the postwar era. First, the totalizing, all-encompassing, and unavoidable guilt of Western civilization described by Horkheimer and Adorno obfuscates the difference between the victims and the perpetrators of Nazism and thus renders invisible the very concrete guilt of the many organizers and implementers of the “Final Solution” (Rensmann 1998, 162). In this sense, notwithstanding Adorno’s vigorous indictment of German moral complacency after 1945, the system of thought outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* anticipates and reinforces one of the key apologetic strategies of representation of the 1950s, when Germans imagined themselves as victims of Hitler, the Allies, and history in general and preferred to ignore their own vital contributions to the German catastrophe. In addition, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides an ambivalent assessment of the role of the Jews in the history of Western Civilization, which is not unprecedented in the history of philosophy but which reflects similarly ambivalent, philo- and anti-Semitic themes in German postwar culture. For Horkheimer and Adorno the Jews are pacesetters as well as latecomers in the fateful race towards enlightenment. On the one hand, they advanced the taboo of mimesis through the prohibition of sacrifice and idolatry. On the other hand, their culture retains elements of the premythological stage of human culture, for

² Adorno 1990, 365. For an excellent commentary on the chapter entitled “After Auschwitz” in *Negative Dialectics* see Bernstein 2001, 371-414.

instance in the Jews' insistence on the 'uncivilized' life-style of the nomad. This ambivalence renders Judaism a superior, more honest religion than Christianity but it can also be read as an explanation for the "Final Solution" which blames the victims for their destruction (Rabinbach 1997, 189-190). After all, in Adorno's and Horkheimer's interpretation, the Nazis target the Jews in order to expunge their persistent non-identity that serves as a shameful reminder of the horror of prehistory and the pleasure of mimicry.

The concept of trauma does not occupy a key position in Adorno's interpretation of Nazism. He uses the term only occasionally, for instance to emphasize the potential for future destruction that the shock of World War II has left in the psyche of the survivors (Adorno 1989, 54). This absence illustrates the marginal status of the concept of trauma in the postwar discourse about war and Holocaust. In addition, the preference for less psychoanalytically 'occupied' phrases in the description and analysis of the consequences of Auschwitz reflects Adorno's ambivalent assessment of the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. On the one hand, he and his collaborators considered Freud's work the last successful theory of bourgeois identity and self-reflexivity. As such, the theoretical insights of psychoanalysis played a key role in their explanations of the origins of Nazism, for example in the study of the Authoritarian Personality (Adorno 1969). On the other hand, the close historical proximity between the invention of psychoanalysis and the German catastrophe required particularly rigorous scrutiny of possible conceptual interdependencies between the two. Furthermore, Adorno despised the therapeutic practice of psychoanalysis as he had encountered it in the United States. The idea that patients could and should happily reconcile themselves with their own past through therapy seemed a particularly distasteful recommendation for the post-Holocaust age (Schneider/Stillke/Leinweber 2000, 68-74). Finally, one can even speculate that the concept of trauma struck too close to home

for the emigrants and intended victims of Nazism who suffered from their own share of survivors' guilt.³ While this speculation can certainly not be proven, it touches upon one of the particularly problematic aspects of current trauma discourse, i.e., the notion of secondary trauma. We will return to this question below, but should not leave Adorno without having emphasized that the terminological distance to trauma discourse evident in his writings does not imply a structural distance as well. Quite on the contrary, Adorno's new categorical imperative and his sweeping indictment of Western civilization provide the prototypes for subsequent philosophical-literary reflections about the meaning of Nazism which do employ the concept of trauma. Adorno's forceful argument that post-Nazi culture needs to address and acknowledge its own limits of representation has become a stock-in-trade of Holocaust aesthetics (Krankenhausen 2001, Koeppen 1993). But in contrast to Adorno, some of his successors who explored the limits of representation through the lens of trauma were less shocked by Auschwitz, less concerned about explaining its origins, and more interested in mobilizing the memory of the "Final Solution" to further their own intellectual agendas.

III

Lyotard represents an important turning point in our reconstruction of the evolution of the philosophical constellation that we might term the Holocaust-trauma complex. On the one hand, one can read Lyotard's work as a translation of Adorno's negative dialectics into the idiom of the linguistic turn (Bernstein 2000, 108). But on the other hand, in the process of this translation, the philosophical representation of Auschwitz undergoes two important revisions. For Adorno, the turn against speculative philosophy and foundational thinking is autobiographically linked to

³ Adorno himself makes an explicit statement about survivor's guilt in *Negative Dialectics* (363) which Bernstein interprets as an autobiographical remark, see Bernstein 2001, 392.

Nazism and its crimes. Like other thinkers, Adorno invokes Auschwitz to give weight to his idiosyncratic aesthetic choices and philosophical options, but the radical transformation of his thought would not have happened without Hitler.⁴ In contrast, the considerably younger Lyotard only abandoned phenomenology and his Marxist political identity after the French disaster in Algeria and the failure of the student movement (Browning 2000, 91-99). Therefore, the frequent references to Auschwitz in Lyotard's work of the 1980s appear more playful than similar references in the writings of Adorno. The simple biographical difference helps explain why Lyotard's texts are even less concerned with the historical specificity of the "Final Solution" and its victims and instead invoke the Holocaust as a kind of litmus test, which had become common practice four decades after the war in the wake of the invention of a popular Holocaust memory. The second important transformation, which separates the thought style of Frankfurt from the language games in Paris, involves the use of psychoanalytic terminology. Lyotard uses the events of the "Final Solution" to explicate his radical linguistic critique of all foundational, synthesizing philosophical paradigms but he also (somewhat contradictorily) posits an Ur-shock in the collective psyche of the West that explains why the West is so persistently concerned with eradicating all others that live in its margins, including the Jews. As a result of both of these transformations, Auschwitz becomes a metaphorical, psychoanalytically charged event which is ideally suited to serve as a weapon in all kinds of philosophical skirmishes: a complex, disembodied academic collective memory for the postmodern age (Pfestroff 2002, 236).

In the *Postmodern Condition*, published in France in 1979 and in the US in 1984, Lyotard had already questioned the accuracy and legitimacy of all large-scale social theories in the

⁴ Adorno shares this intellectual trajectory with many other German-Jewish emigrants and their experiences and specific insights set them apart from the postwar intellectual scene on both sides of the Atlantic, see Traverso 2000, 43-50 and Diner 1988.

tradition of Hegel and Marx (Lyotard 1984). In his assessment, these absolutist systems of thought, practiced every day in a wide variety of disciplines including science and history, repress the increasing social and linguistic diversity of the postmodern information society. Four years later Lyotard expanded upon this brief, somewhat superficial celebration of plurality in his most rigorous philosophical treatise, *The Differend* (Lyotard 1988). Leaving behind his prior focus on narratives he provided a more fundamental linguistic model designed to express the exclusionary nature of language and the impossibility of reaching fair judgements in language. This time sentences, or phrases, are the basic linguistic unit of his analysis and he tries to demonstrate that sentences are often produced according to different sets of rules and from competing methodological and ideological vantage points. The ensuing collision of meanings produces a theoretical dilemma and often also a political injustice. In theory, competing rules and truth claims create a state of undecidability since there are no legitimate, superior set of rules which help us settle such cases. In practice, however, given the likely power differential between different speakers and different ideologies, such collisions are quickly settled in an epistemologically arbitrary but politically predictable fashion. In the most extreme case the predominant protocols of meaning production might even completely prevent the expression of perfectly legitimate feelings and interests. Among many other consequences this dilemma undermines the integrity and possibility of conventional philosophy of history and historiography (Flynn 2002).

In this context Lyotard raises the example of the Holocaust in a particularly provocative way. In his assessment Holocaust deniers like Robert Faurisson make a distasteful but cognitively compelling argument when they demand eyewitness testimony about the inner workings of the Nazi gas chambers before they accept the claim that such installations actually

existed. Obviously such a demand cannot be met since all people who witnessed the gassing inside the gas chambers have been killed there. But it is important to note, Lyotard continues, that the rules of evidence set forth by Holocaust deniers represent one of many possible rules for the construction of truthful statements about the past and that these rules cannot be displaced by recourse to some superior, generally accepted logic for truthful sentences (Lyotard 1988, 3, 19, 32). In addition and more important, the rules embraced by the deniers are in principle compatible with the rules of evidence that govern many cognitive enterprises including historiography. As a result, the victims who died in Auschwitz are violated all over again when the events of the “Final Solution” are processed according to the established epistemological protocols of science. In Lyotard’s words the victims suffered a “damage accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage”⁵; they are the victims of a representational wrong, a *differend*, which should be put into language but does not fit the present laws of representation. Lyotard found a compelling metaphor to illustrate his point when he compared Auschwitz to an earthquake that destroyed all seismographic devices and therefore cannot be measured and represented within the applicable sign systems and only leaves powerful, yet imprecise traces of its magnitude (Lyotard 1988, 56).

Critics of Lyotard have appropriately and perceptively pointed out that his abstract and generalizing remarks on communication and the impossibility of justice could be interpreted as just another grand narrative in the tradition of Western philosophy.⁶ In addition, it has been argued that Lyotard underestimates the complexity and epistemological sophistication of historiography and other scholarly pursuits (Norris 2000). Both criticisms are worth entertaining

⁵ Quote from Lyotard 1988, 5; see in this context also Readings 1991, 122.

⁶ Anderson 1998 and especially compelling on this point Frank 1988.

but for our purposes it is more important to emphasize that, even more than Adorno, Lyotard simply uses Auschwitz to illustrate his belief in the general incommensurability between reality and representation. Moreover, and this time in contrast to Adorno, Lyotard integrates the example of Auschwitz into a potentially positive, even upbeat message: Human-made disasters make us realize the destructive nature of coherent, totalizing systems of thought because these systems are at the root of events like Auschwitz. Consequently, such disasters also help us resist the gravitational pull of grand narratives, for instance by embracing alterity and promoting difference beyond the grasp of social theory and social engineering (Davies 1998, 91-92). Later in his career Lyotard realized that successful resistance has become more and more difficult in light of the overwhelming triumph of the grand narrative of Western capitalism. In fact, at this stage the intellectual trajectory of his work follows again closely in the footsteps of Adorno since both seek vestiges of authentic nonidentity in the realm of aesthetics, in Lyotard's case through the concept of the sublime (Lyotard 1997).

A full appreciation of the complexity of Lyotard's thoughts surrounding Auschwitz leads one to the conclusion that Lyotard's often cited metaphor of the earthquake is misleading. That comparison would only make sense if we assume that the technical apparatuses used to measure earthquakes are themselves an important cause for destructive seismic eruptions. But the metaphor of the earthquake highlights the structural compatibility between Lyotard's style of philosophical engagement and Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) which Lyotard explored at length in another study about the meaning of Auschwitz and the history of Judaism. In the process of this exploration Lyotard's work assumes an explicit psychoanalytical dimension which had remained undeveloped in his earlier writings and which is also missing from Adorno's thinking about the "Final Solution."

In *Heidegger and the Jews* Lyotard seeks to provide an additional ethical foundation for his valorization of difference and clarifies the role that Auschwitz plays in his philosophy. He assumes a foundational shock at the basis of Western subjectivity, which was so powerful that our psyche and our culture have never been able to represent and assimilate it. Lyotard does not use the term trauma directly but he rephrases Freud's classic definition of trauma as an asymmetrical, disjointed double blow, which consists of an original injury of such force that it never registers in the human consciousness and a second, belated surfacing of symptoms, which seem to come out of nowhere (Lyotard 1990, 15-17). Lyotard remains purposefully vague about the precise nature of this foundational trauma but he links it to the Holocaust in two steps. First, he suggests that the Jews are not part of Western tradition because they have found a different, more honest way of dealing with the initial shock that acknowledges its intrinsic unrepresentability. As a result, for the West that believes in its powers of representation, the Jews constitute a visible, painful reminder of the forgotten original trauma (Lyotard 1990, 22). This second step in Lyotard's argument explains why the Jews as the eternal other have been the victims of such relentless persecution, which culminated in Auschwitz. In addition, this connection also explains why the meaning of Auschwitz can never be completely grasped. Such a representation would entail nothing less than a complete explanation of the unrepresentable trauma at the heart of the Western psyche (Lyotard 1990, 45 and Seymour 2000, 132).

The parallels to Adorno's thinking about Auschwitz are clearly recognizable even when Lyotard insists more emphatically than his predecessor that he does not want the term "the jews" to be read literally. For him the expression "the jews" designates all persecuted minorities in the history of the West.⁷ With that caveat in mind, which also establishes some distance to the

⁷ Lyotard 1990, 3. The interchangeability of the victims was already suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno although they followed a more conventional Marxist interpretation of anti-Semitism, see Adorno/Horkheimer 1988, 171-173.

historical event of the “Final Solution,” we realize that Lyotard has elegantly constructed the free-floating metaphor of a severe, unrepresentable (and perhaps unverifiable) collective trauma, which is easily attached to all kinds of issues and agendas (Seidler 1998, 115).

IV

A number of other postmodern thinkers have developed ideas about trauma, representation, and the Holocaust that parallel Lyotard’s efforts, although few have pursued the topic with the same persistence.⁸ This complex body of work served as inspiration for the literary critic Cathy Caruth who was one of the first theorists to consult both philosophical and psychological texts on trauma and wrote a short, elegant book, which has become quite influential in the humanities.⁹ Caruth avoids the complicated, self-reflexive language and dialectical flights of thought of her intellectual sources. Instead, she presents a compact, easily adopted model of cultural trauma, which is even further stripped of any concrete suffering and turns us all into accomplished survivors. Not surprisingly, the specific events of Holocaust or similar catastrophes no longer play any significant role in Caruth’s world of ‘trauma light.’¹⁰

Caruth combines a selective reading of Freud and a similarly reductive interpretation of the psychological research on trauma with a critique of the referential illusion of language. For Caruth, as for many other theorists, the trauma victim exists in a state of temporal limbo caught between a destructive event that did not register at the moment of its occurrence and the belated symptoms that unconsciously and obsessively repeat the injury to the person’s protective shield

⁸ See the contributions in Milchman/Rosenberg 1998.

⁹ Caruth 1996; see also Caruth (1995). For applications of Caruth’s concept of cultural trauma see for instance Hammer 2001, Ramadanovic 2001, and Horvitz 2000.

¹⁰ Others have tried to employ Caruth’s concepts in the analysis of Holocaust representations and Holocaust pedagogy but ended up in a similar moral quagmire of trauma, sublimity, and exceptionalism which provides little insight into actual social and psychological dynamics of Holocaust education, see Bernard-Donals/Glejzer 2001.

without adding to the victim's understanding of her own fate. However, although the meaning of past events remains excluded from consciousness as well as linguistic representation, Caruth takes the symptoms, i.e., flashbacks, nightmares, etc., to be literal representations of the original destructive event (Caruth 1996, 4, 11, 17, 57-59, 91-92). With this belief she finds herself in contradiction with most of the empirical and theoretical work on trauma. While a very active and influential minority of contemporary trauma researchers, whom Caruth enlists for her cause, insist on the accuracy and literal character of recovered memories, most empiricists question that simplistic assertion. In addition, although Caruth goes to impressive lengths to find passages in Freud's large, complex, and contradictory oeuvre which confirm her assumptions, the very notion that there is such thing as a non-symbolic, non-reworked, literal memory of key emotional events in a person's life strikes me as a fundamentally un-Freudian idea.¹¹ But in a sense all this criticism, however accurate, distracts from the main focus and impetus of Caruth's contribution. She is not interested in improving our understanding of the experiences and treatment of trauma victims or revising the theoretical foundations for such treatments. She focuses on the question of trauma because the phenomenon appears to her as a perfect, particularly vivid illustration of her understanding of the workings of language, which she adopts from Paul de Man.

In *The Resistance to Theory* de Man concedes to the critics of deconstruction that language and philosophy include a referential element, but he immediately adds that this element only becomes perceivable in moments of crisis in a system of representation, when the system temporarily disintegrates under the weight of its own gaps and contradictions (de Man 1986). For Caruth, this insight leads to the following paradox: "[R]eference emerges not in its accessibility to perception, but in the resistance of language to perceptual analogies; ... the

¹¹ These two points of criticism of Caruth's work have been developed very compellingly in Leys 2000, 266-297; see also Weigel 1999.

impact of reference is felt, not in the search for an external referent, but in the necessity, and failure, of theory” (Caruth 1996, 90). The trauma model presents a great opportunity to extend de Man’s theory into the past by arguing that our knowledge of history is the result of a belated failure of representation. In Caruth’s words: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 1996, 18). Caruth’s generalizing statements have severe consequences. Since she does not content herself with exploring the limits of knowledge of past events of catastrophic proportions and instead highlights the alleged traumatic component in all representations of history, she has transformed the experience of trauma into a basic anthropological condition. In her mind, we are all victims and survivors of the trauma of representation, although, one might add, for many of us that does not seem to be a particularly debilitating experience.¹²

It is probably no coincidence that Caruth presents her general notion of trauma at a time when victimhood and survivor status have assumed substantial symbolic value. Under these circumstances Caruth could fully develop an interpretive theme which is already present, however tentatively, in the wartime writings of the emigrants of the Frankfurt School and has come to influence many subsequent philosophical inquiries into the meaning of Auschwitz. Apparently, since the 1980s, consumers of popular culture as well as academics have found the figure of the survivor irresistibly attractive.¹³ But few scholarly texts in this tradition display

¹² Deborah Jensen relates the valorization of suffering in Caruth’s writing to the cult of the wound as literal metaphor which has a long literary tradition both in religious and secular contexts, see Jensen 2001, 22.

¹³ For the rise of the survivor paradigm in US popular culture see for example Shandler 1999; for parallel developments in Germany see Kansteiner 2003.

survivor-envy as clearly as *Unclaimed Experience*.¹⁴

Inadvertently, in her introduction, Caruth highlights what is at stake in the decontextualization and dehistoricization of the survivor experience. Following Freud's exposition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* she discusses a powerful scene in Torquato Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. In the scene in question, Tancred, the hero of the epic, unintentionally kills his love Clorinda because she is hiding in the armor of an enemy soldier. Having recognized his terrible mistake, he commits the same error again when he cuts a tree in a magic forest and the blood and the voice of Clorinda, emerging from the cut, bemoan this repeated attack. For Caruth, the experience and actions of Tancred fit the trauma profile; never having assimilated the original experience he is condemned to repeat it (Caruth 1996, 1-9). However, as Ruth Leys points out in her comments on Caruth's reading of the scene, Freud used the example from Tasso to illustrate the dynamics of repetition compulsion not traumatic neurosis (Leys 2000, 193). In addition, and more important, Caruth repeatedly refers to Tancred as a survivor of trauma although he might be more accurately characterized as a perpetrator. In the case of Tasso's hero such objections might appear pedantic but we would probably feel differently about the question if we were to replace Tancred with the organizers and implementors of the "Final Solution."

V

Caruth might be the most successful and most widely read postmodern theorist in pursuit of the representational dilemmas of the post-traumatic age, but she is certainly not the only one. Her fellow travelers include literary scholars such as Shoshana Felman who has applied de Man's

¹⁴ Geoffrey Hartman has used the term "memory envy" for this phenomenon, Hartman 1996, 111.

theories in her analyses of Holocaust representations and intellectuals like Slavoj Žižek who explores the narcissistic self-referentiality of the poststructural subject through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Žižek 1989, Felman/Laub 1992). As a result, we can already look back on a well-established tradition of using trauma and its intellectual precursors as metaphors for the failure of representation. But while it is appropriate to insist on a troubling element of undecidability in all processes of communication, it is neither necessary nor advisable to express this essential dilemma of representation through the metaphor of trauma. Just because trauma is inevitably a problem of representation in memory and communication does not imply the reverse, i.e., that problems of representation are always partaking in the traumatic. Even if certain analogies exist we have to acknowledge that the dilemmas of representation and the distress of trauma never carry the same effects, intensities, and risks. Therefore, it is disappointing that none of the intellectuals discussed above have developed theoretically ambitious and historically precise analyses of the social, cultural, and psychological consequences of extreme violence and man-made disasters. That failure might in itself constitute a response to and an evasion of the legacy of trauma, but it causes a certain degree of conceptual frustration and ethical unease in the historically inclined theorist. The aesthetic ambition of many philosophical treatises dedicated to the meaning of Auschwitz seems to be at odds with the concrete historical suffering which the name Auschwitz designates. Adorno still had a clear sense of this shortcoming but, like his less sensitive successors, he provided few concrete insights into the relationship between the historical events of the “Final Solution” and the generations living in relatively close proximity to the catastrophe. In response to this gap in the contemporary theoretical discourse on trauma and the posttraumatic, a number of theorists have called for an intellectual approach to trauma that brings the abstract, counter-representational

traditions discussed above in contact with alternative perspectives on trauma which have developed in other professional contexts and which are generally committed to the paradigm of realism (LaCapra 2001, Rothberg 2000).

From this perspective of a traumatic realism Dominick LaCapra has exposed the conceptual problems inherent in the Auschwitz/trauma discourse from Adorno to Caruth. LaCapra argues that the philosophers and cultural critics following in their wake tend to develop their arguments at the level of the limit case, which explains why they are attracted to the topic of Auschwitz in the first place. Their thought style highlights the potential radical philosophical implications of events like the “Final Solution” which might be difficult to convey in other ways but this research strategy is not well suited for a variegated, contextual exploration of the cultural and psychological dynamics that have shaped the collective memories of the Holocaust. The shortcoming applies in particular to the use of the concept of trauma because, as LaCapra argues compellingly, the intellectuals in question tend to conflate loss with absence, or, put differently, they fail to elaborate on the difference between historical and structural trauma (LaCapra 2001, 64-65, 76-84). The latter designates the ontogenetic challenges, which all human beings have to come to terms with in their lives and which have been identified by psychoanalysis in its attempts to describe the development of sexual normalization and gender identity. The perils of growing up -- for instance, the separation from the other or the encounter of the real -- are not weathered in the same way by all individuals and certainly entail traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, these processes are by definition transhistorical and have to be differentiated from specific, violent, historical events, which place an extra and extraordinary burden on the psychological survival skills of the involved persons.¹⁵ Applying the methods and language of

¹⁵ The debates about the veracity of claims of sexual abuse of children, who recall their alleged traumatic experiences in the context of therapy, sometimes only as adults, highlight the important difference between

psychoanalysis to the process of coming to terms with events like the Holocaust requires adjustments in terminology and research design because, as a discipline, psychoanalysis is primarily concerned with the explanation of structural trauma. Such precision is especially needed when psychoanalytical language is ‘merely’ applied in a metaphorical sense since this usage is particularly likely to set in motion problematic and unintended semantic consequences. In fact, since the proponents of the cultural trauma paradigm vacillate between empirical, moral, and symbolic claims, we do not know what discursive or non-discursive events might actually constitute a purely metaphorical trauma. Moreover, as we will see, on moral and empirical grounds the concept of cultural trauma makes little sense.

VI

With role models like Caruth paving the way, the field of cultural studies is busily lamenting and celebrating the ubiquity of trauma in contemporary culture. Critics move quickly from the writings of postmodern theorists to the publications of psychotherapists and from actual victims to those who suffer with them or through them and declare all these parties participants and casualties of the process of cultural trauma. By emphasizing the particular contagiousness of trauma, the proponents of the cultural trauma paradigm redefine post-traumatic stress as a “category which mediates between a specific individual’s injury and a group or a culture.” Kirby Farrell, who developed this particular definition, also invoked what he considered an especially vivid example. In his mind, “Hitler, who was nearly killed in World War I, infected an entire nation with his post-traumatic symptoms. In a sense, all his policies obsessively attempted to

structural and historical trauma. If the past abuse is imagined it represents a chapter in the structural trauma of the fantasizing subject; if the abuse actually happened it represents a historical trauma. See the perceptive discussion in Butler 2000 and Prager 1998, 127-174.

undo that earlier calamity through fantastic aggression” (Farrell 1998, 12). As speculative as they may be, Farrell’s reflections on Hitler’s psychological peculiarities, which have long been the preoccupation of psycho-historians, are not the most problematic part of his argument. More important and more misleading is the implicit assumption that representations of symptoms of trauma replicate such symptoms in the minds of the audience and produce a collective trauma which unites many individuals who have never experienced or directly witnessed acts of extreme violence.

Even cultural critics who acknowledge essential conceptual differences between individual and collective states of mind tend to construct cultural trauma as a process that somehow runs parallel to the development of actual psychological trauma. Thus Ron Eyerman argues in his study of the collective memory of slavery in the US that cultural trauma is mediated through representations which express and produce “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric of a relatively coherent group,” for instance a nation or a smaller collective.¹⁶ Eyerman applies the term cultural memory both to the distorting representations of slavery in the mainstream media and the opposing image of slavery in the African-American subculture. While the US media invented an idyllic image of the past, the African-American counter-memory fostered critical identities and strategies of emancipation that finally helped bring about political change in the last century (for instance Eyerman 2001, 1-22). Even this short summary of Eyerman’s study illustrates that the collective memory of slavery in the US is much more complex than the term cultural trauma implies. The variegated, at times

¹⁶ Eyerman 2001, 3. Unfortunately, the UC Press publication, which provides the basis for Eyerman’s interesting conceptual framework and which is cited repeatedly in the introduction, is not yet available: *Cultural Trauma Theory and Applications* edited by Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman et al. has not yet been published and certainly not in 2001 as claimed by Eyerman. See also Alexander 2002, which is excellent on the reconstruction of the trajectory of popular Holocaust memory but not compelling in the conceptualization of cultural trauma.

contradictory representations of slavery did not simply cause “a loss of identity and meaning,” as Eyerman argues. Quite on the contrary, as the author himself demonstrates, some representations of the traumatic past of slavery had a very positive, empowering influence on group identities in the US. In this case, as in many others including our contemporary Holocaust culture, we should probably avoid reducing complex media effects to the trope of trauma. The experiences of actual trauma victims seem to have little in common with the collective or individual psychological effects of media representations and the existing case studies give us no indication how to bridge that gap responsibly even if only on a metaphorical level.

The proponents of the notion of cultural trauma invoke a wide range of examples, including philosophical reflections about the traumatic nature of human communication as well as empirical claims, for instance about the rising baseline of stress in modern societies or the traumatizing effects of media events like 9/11 or the Challenger catastrophe (Farrell 1998, 2, 27). By relating alleged facts of mass traumatization and general anthropological theories about the function of trauma, cultural theorists connect the two different traditions of trauma theory and attest to their considerable intellectual appeal. But the combination of two different ways of conceptualizing trauma raises the stakes of their interventions, which now have to live up to the demands of psychotherapeutic theory and practice and the conceptual ambition of speculative philosophy. Not surprisingly, the trendy celebrations of trauma fall short on both accounts but are especially disappointing in their limited understanding of actual historical trauma.

Cultural trauma is only a useful conceptual tool if we can show theoretically and/or empirically how the interplay between everyday life and electronic media produces something akin to trauma on a collective scale. But this undertaking runs into several obstacles. First, there is the somewhat pedestrian but nevertheless relevant objection that trauma has become such a

widely used tool in cultural criticism at a point in time when the accident and violent crime rates in most Western societies and in particular in the U.S. have dropped precipitously (US Department of Justice 1998). Second, especially in light of the reduced number of actual trauma victims, the practical question arises how many members of a given collective have to be suffering from posttraumatic stress before the collective as a whole might be appropriately characterized as a traumatized community. Alternatively, if collective trauma should not be construed as an aggregate of individual traumata, the problem remains how this collective phenomenon is defined, especially if we only consider it to be a metaphorical event (Matraux 2001). Finally, all these questions highlight a more interesting shortcoming in the literature on cultural trauma. While the analysts of cultural trauma emphasize the role of the media in the making of cultural trauma and occasionally even cite the psychological literature on spectacular historical traumata like the Holocaust, they display little curiosity about the work of their colleagues in communication departments who have studied the psychological effects of modern media for many decades.

VII

For as long as film and television have existed, scholars, legislators, and representatives of the media industry have argued about the possible negative effects of violent media content (Sparks/Sparks 2002). Although experts still propose different, even mutually exclusive explanations for their findings, the overwhelming majority of researchers agree that media violence is a small, but significant contributor to aggressive social behavior. Furthermore, there seems to be agreement that adults and adolescents are very unlikely to suffer traumatizing psychological injuries in the course of their media consumption although this positive conclusion

does not apply to the effect of violent television on young children. Since children only gradually acquire the ability to differentiate clearly between reality and representation, they may feel extreme fear and anxiety during and after the broadcast of violent TV fare and this experience can have serious harmful consequences for their emotional and cognitive development.¹⁷ But with the exception of this specific case, the available literature does not suggest that trauma will ever become a particularly useful tool for the analysis of media reception. In fact, recent inquiries into the reasons for the popularity of violent entertainment begin to explain why the representation of trauma, unlike its first-hand experience, is so attractive and pleasurable for viewers.

The study of the attraction of violent entertainment is still in its infancy. Experts have spent an extraordinary amount of time and effort in an attempt to ascertain and understand the negative effects of violent television, but they have rarely bothered to ask why consumers find this violence so interesting in the first place (Sparks/Sparks 2000). At this stage the field abounds with interesting and highly speculative hypotheses which cast a very wide net. We are told, for instance, that our infatuation with media violence reflects the troublesome trajectory of human phylogeny and represents a serious case of evolutionary maladjustment. For our forefathers the thrill of extra- and intraspecific violence was inextricably linked to the gratification of their most basic needs. Unfortunately, since we cannot change the results of thousands of years of evolutionary pressure on short notice, we are still seeking out the excitement of the kill in the jungle of the cable networks (Zillmann 1998, 193). Such explanations are compatible with and often informed by a wide range of philosophical and psychological models including Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, Elias' thoughts

¹⁷ Perse, 2001, 197-223; Weimann 2000, 79-121; and compare to Potter 2003, 67-84. See also Ian Hacking's interesting remarks on the construction of the child viewer in media studies, Hacking 1999, 25-28.

about the civilizing process, and Adorno's speculations about mimesis and human culture, which we touched upon earlier (Jung 1953, Elias 1982). Obviously, the models themselves cannot be empirically verified but they have helped craft research projects that cast some light on the complex psychological dynamics of media reception. Media psychologists have for instance conducted a sequence of psychological experiments designed to highlight the interdependence between moral values and the enjoyment of violent media content. The results of these experiments are especially important for our purposes because they point towards a type of emotional interaction between consumer and medium which parallels similar emotional processes in everyday life but falls far short of full-fledged identification.

Apparently, viewers participate in the narrative universe, which unfolds on the screen, in very much the same way that they react to real events, which they experience as mere witnesses. Under both circumstances we continuously screen our social environment and stand in moral judgement of the behavior of acquaintances and strangers, be they real or electronically produced. Depending on the outcome of our moral judgements we develop positive or negative affective dispositions towards the characters and enjoy their good or bad fortune, as the case may be. Negative affective dispositions enable us to derive pleasure from violence directed against unsympathetic figures, especially if we have just seen them victimize people we like. The psychologists who have developed and tested disposition theory argue that it is much better suited to explain our interaction with electronic and digital media than the more traditional Freudian notion of identification. In their mind, viewers do not identify with media representations in the way that they bond with parents, siblings, or close friends. Consequently, our emotional responses to media consumption are misrepresented as vicarious gratification or vicarious suffering (or trauma) because we never put ourselves in the position of the characters

on the screen; we merely observe them and relate to them according to our own moral interests (Zillmann 1998, Zillmann 1991).

The disposition theory represents only one option for exploring the vast range of experiences and emotional responses, which extend from the personal suffering of extreme violence and trauma on the one end of the spectrum to the consumption of violent media representations on the other. Depending on the theoretical tools used to map out this space we can develop different systems of gradation and differentiation. Following the above model, we could assume a decisive qualitative difference in the interactions between human beings and their closest emotional associates and their interactions with the rest of the world (including media images). Incidentally, this model would be compatible with the definition of PTSD suggested by the American Psychiatric Association (APA 2000). Alternatively, following the proposals of other scholars, we could assume a decisive qualitative distinction between reality and representation and suggest that the emotional registers of our social life differ from our emotional investments in our media consumption (McCauley 1998, 160-161; Tal 1996, 15). But irrespective of the precise solution of this conceptual challenge we should realize that the likelihood of traumatic experiences and posttraumatic stress decreases as we move along the spectrum and that most of us on this end of the scale, who are fortunate enough to observe trauma only through the media, will probably and hopefully never experience the anguish of the relatively few on the other end. Therefore, the question remains why we would want to collapse this large spectrum, even if only metaphorically, and subsume the very different experiences of trauma and with trauma under the vague rubric of cultural trauma.

The experience of violence, pain, and trauma is always socially mediated. The way we react to and try to make sense of our suffering cannot be separated from the specific social

contexts, which have shaped us. Society defines and helps us enact the difference between normal, even desirable structural trauma and excessive traumatic pain.¹⁸ In addition, our environment plays a key role in the recuperation from both structural and historical trauma. But this constructivist insight should not confuse us about the fact that under current conditions the media only rarely cause trauma, although they represent an important source of social knowledge about trauma. Naturally, that knowledge can be of very different quality. On the one hand, as avid consumers of prime time TV violence we might come to faulty conclusions about the actual amount of violence that takes place in the world outside our living rooms.¹⁹ On the other hand, the best representations of traumatic events that we encounter on the screen help us gain emotional insight into the suffering of actual victims by having us experience a very faint echo of their psychological distress and confusion. That reception experience, which we might call dispositional unease and which LaCapra has termed “emphatic unsettlement,” takes advantage of our capacity for mimetic affection (LaCapra 2001, 41 and passim). Representations of violence, especially images of the human body in pain, can elicit from us spontaneous emphatic physical reactions. In most cases this “affective contagion” is quickly sublated within redemptive, harmonious plot types as the example of our contemporary Holocaust culture illustrates (Bennett 2000). The large majority of Holocaust representations including classics like *Schindler’s List* provide a well-calibrated dose of emphatic unsettlement as well as an emotionally gratifying sense of closure. That explains why media audiences across the world take so much pleasure in the history of the Holocaust which seems to have assumed the characteristics of a high brow horror genre (Miller/Tougaw 2002, 3).

¹⁸ Still excellent on this point Scarry 1985.

¹⁹ Such attitudinal effects of television are relatively well researched, see Potter 1999, 129-130.

It is very possible that Holocaust representations have retraumatizing consequences for survivors of the “Final Solution.”²⁰ In addition, embracing the Holocaust for identity purposes might have negative political and didactic consequences (Novick 1999). But there is no indication that cultural and political appropriation of the Holocaust by larger collectives, including Jewish communities in Israel and the U.S., has dominant effects on these collectives that are well described as traumatic in a literal or metaphorical sense. Consequently, despite the fact that representations of trauma have very different political and social value, none of them, from the misleading to the most accomplished, are accurately described as being traumatic in and of themselves. In our culture of violence, cultural trauma that actually deserves that name seems to be a rare phenomenon.

VIII

In the 1990s anthropologists and philosophers of science unraveled the intricate history of traumatic memory and post-traumatic stress-syndrome (Young 1995, Hacking 1995, Hacking 1998). In the process they have taught us that mental illnesses, like many other complex scientific facts, are invented and real at the same time because the ontological bases of such illnesses can never be separated from the epistemological apparatuses that are used to define and treat them. On the one hand, a disorder like PTSD is "glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented." On the other hand, "the reality of PTSD is confirmed empirically by its place in people's lives, by their experiences and convictions, and by the personal and collective investments that have been

²⁰ On the semiotics of retraumatization see the compelling remarks in Tal 1996, 16.

made in it" (Young 1995, 5). As a result of the intimate relationship between a given disease and its specific social context, it makes little sense to use a particular diagnosis in other contexts, for instance by projecting PTSD back into history.

The historicization of the psychological trauma paradigm demonstrates that the evolution of the social sciences and their popular reception is difficult to predict. The trauma paradigm might soon collapse as a result of its overextension or we might continue inventing new kinds of trauma victims for many years to come. We know, however, that in psychiatric practice as well as psychiatric theory, the trauma diagnosis has been subject to substantial "conceptual bracket creep" as Richard McNally puts it (McNally 2003, 281; also Hacking 2002, 18). Trauma treatment became a lucrative business in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, but once the specialists had attended to the psychological pain of the veterans, they quickly ran out of suitable patients. Since there were no obvious candidates in sight, the psychiatric profession gradually lowered the threshold for classifying an experience as traumatic and never again encountered a similar dearth of customers (Young 1995, 287-290; McNally 2003, 279). Roughly during the same time trauma studies in the humanities experienced their own version of conceptual bracket creep as a result of the rise of postmodern theory, increased interdisciplinary collaboration, and intellectual inquiries into the legacy of the Holocaust. Turning trauma into a general human condition was a great strategy for raising awareness for the suffering of forgotten victims, but once that important task had been accomplished the continued claims about the ubiquity of cultural trauma have quickly turned into unintended gestures of disrespect towards today's victims of extreme violence. In light of the parallel developments in the humanities and the psychiatric profession, the liberal use of the trauma metaphor appears epistemologically sound but it simply does not strike me as ethically responsible, especially when applied in non-

therapeutic settings. The American Psychiatric Association might have had very good reasons to revise its initial assessment of PTSD towards a more variegated understanding of trauma (APA 2000). The new approach acknowledges the fact the human beings react very differently to events and provides individuals with access to psychiatric care who had been previously excluded from treatment. But people who are not responsible for the psychological well-being of mentally ill individuals, and therefore subject to different ethical standards of professional conduct, might find it useful to recall how psychological trauma was defined at the beginning of the trauma wave. In 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association first codified PTSD, the organization's manual defined a traumatic event as "outside the range of usual human experience" and "markedly distressful to almost anyone who experiences it" (APA 1980, 236-237). Since living conditions have not changed that radically in the last quarter century that definition still sounds like an excellent point of departure, if not for therapists then at least for cultural critics.

The concept of trauma, employed on an individual and a collective scale, differs significantly from closely related concepts like identity and memory. In contrast to the latter two terms trauma implies the occurrence of some serious real or imagined injury with long-term psychological, political, and moral consequences. Therefore the overly liberal use of the term trauma has led to a curious phenomenon. Through misappropriation, especially in the humanities, trauma has become a moral untruth. The mere presence of violence, actual or symbolic, is routinely conflated with the presence of trauma, with the result that those exposed to violence are summarily turned into victims. Obviously, it is sometimes impossible to determine at what precise point political advocacy, emotional empathy, or philosophical ambition beget metaphorical misrepresentation. The experiences of perpetrators and some bystanders of

violence might still fit the trauma concept but the pleasures of spectatorship can no longer be reconciled with even the most flexible notion of trauma. Moral honesty and conceptual and historical precision demand that trauma is first and foremost read from the perspective of the victim and only then carefully expanded to explore other borderline phenomena (Mitchell 2000, 298). Only in that way can we better understand the exceptionally destructive combination of violence and identification at the core of the trauma experience.

The power of the trauma metaphor is the result of the confluence of different, independent fields of inquiry, several of which we have analyzed above. With considerable delay and at various speeds the intellectual disciplines concerned with trauma defined and valorized the experiences of the victims of the “Final Solution” and other violent events but also applied the new construct in a wide range of discursive and analytical settings. In the last two decades of the 20th century this increasing interdisciplinary collaboration helped create an ideological space which made victimhood and its entitlements a mark of the everyday. The above analysis was designed to unravel this ideological master concept of trauma by directing the seemingly compatible methods and questions of different disciplines against each other. Our inquiry has shown that at least in one key respect the psychological and the philosophical-literary discourses follow different trajectories and even contradict each other. Obviously, psychologists cannot agree on the precise nature of trauma, but despite this disagreement and despite the liberalized definition of what counts as traumatic stress, academic and clinical psychologists are still concerned about defining and defending the border between the traumatic and the non-traumatic; in fact, negotiating and maintaining that border is one of the *raison d’êtres* of the discipline (McNally 2003). In contrast, the philosophical discourse on trauma has systematically undermined the distance between the traumatic and the non-traumatic and identified key

elements of trauma in our everyday culture, including our routine academic pursuits. This tension between the two traditions of trauma research explains the inherent instability of the concept of cultural trauma which follows in the footsteps of both traditions without having addressed, let alone mastered, the challenge of integrating their diverging methodologies and intellectual trajectories.

Rather than providing a ‘balanced’ analysis concerned with creating a middle ground understanding of trauma, we read from the scientific-metonymic against the literary-metaphorical pole of the trauma discourse spectrum. That strategy reflects my conviction that the most severe abuses of the trauma concept currently occur in the abstract, metaphorical language of cultural criticism. In this context the universalization of trauma has had puzzling consequences because the valorization of semantic excess and caesuras privileges narrow, selective perceptions of contemporary culture, including Holocaust culture. The trope of trauma has become a comforting fiction of continuity for an intellectual establishment that has belatedly embraced the exceptionality of Auschwitz and, perched on that moral high ground, no longer wants to imagine a post-traumatic world that might be unfazed by events like the “Final Solution.” Considering our culture exclusively under the sign of trauma leaves us with two options: either we pursue a process of cultural working-through, for instance through our own contributions to Holocaust education and trauma studies, or we can watch our societies suffer from the adverse consequences that the denial of cultural trauma allegedly entails, for instance, our continued self-destruction as a result of the eternal return of the repressed. But the trope of trauma devalues many other subject positions. It makes it difficult, for example, to interpret the detached curiosity, with which many consumers react to Holocaust media products, as anything other than an ideological screen or a psychological defense mechanism. Ironically, in the way

that it has been applied as a conceptual scheme, trauma excludes the possibility of radical discontinuity and indifference in the aftermath of historical catastrophe and in this sense represents just another self-centered academic fiction.

A closer look at the long history of the trauma metaphor reminds us what philosophers had originally found so attractive about the concept of trauma when they began to contemplate the legacy of Nazism and Judeocide. Frank Ankersmit succinctly captures this intellectual attraction in the following statement: “It has often been argued that our sole contact with or experience of reality in which reality discloses to us its true nature, its radical strangeness and majestic indifference to us occurs in trauma – for in the non-traumatic experience of reality, reality has already been forced within the limits of the known, the familiar and the domesticated” (Ankersmit 2002, 75). Clearly, Ankersmit’s words attest to the problematic aestheticization of trauma in much of recent theory but he also reminds us that trauma, however subliminal an event, remains a rare occurrence and that most representations of trauma, including mass media products and the writings of cultural critics, have domesticating and utterly untraumatic effects that are nevertheless worth studying.

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Notes

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