Trauma and Media

Theories, Histories, and Images

Allen Meek

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Introduction

Trauma and Media argues that theoretical and cultural discourses of trauma and witnessing, which have achieved such prominence in recent research in the humanities, have often tended to reinforce rather than interrogate the assumption that certain events are inherently traumatic for large collectives, such as nations or specific ethnic groups. Recent trauma theory wants to bear witness to authentic forms of testimony that directly transmit experience outside the codes and conventions of mainstream media. Against this transmission model, this book argues for an understanding of historical trauma as an open-ended, experimental approach to engaging with the violent and catastrophic legacies of the past. I understand historical trauma not only in terms of bearing witness to specific events and experiences, but also as an ongoing struggle over representations of the past. The conceptualization of trauma plays an important part in that struggle.

In the following chapters I present a critique of contemporary trauma theory and develop an alternative account of historical trauma. Against theoretical constructions of traumatic memory as a literal trace of an external reality, or the testimony of a traumatized subject as the living embodiment of historical truth, *Trauma and Media* understands historical trauma as only revealed through intertextual constructions whose methodological precedents include Freudian psychoanalysis, Walter Benjamin's "dialectical images" and Theodor Adorno's "micrologies." Historical trauma is not grounded in memory traces but in the interpretation of what may be "forgotten" in the texts of mass media, academic criticism, psychoanalysis and critical theory itself. Historical traumas are constructions of collective memories that cannot be verified through empirical research, or by ascribing an indexical relation between the image and the real. Instead the following chapters situate trauma in different constellations of theories, histories and images in order to reveal what is at stake politically in these traumatic identifications. Sometimes this requires reading texts against the grain in order to elaborate the historical contexts and political implications of trauma's role in modern media criticism.

This book also stresses analysis of the unconscious structures of political identity rather than identification with, or empathy for, the victim/

survivor of trauma. In the face of the community of witness and the politics of collective grieving, I develop a critical theory of historical trauma which allows us to understand human life subject to biopolitical power. Giorgio Agamben has been seen by several critics[1] as making claims regarding the impossibility of accurately representing trauma and for the ethical status of the survivor-witness that are consistent with trauma theory as developed by Cathy Caruth and others. However, in the following chapters I read Agamben, along with the critical theories of Benjamin and Adorno, as providing an important account of power and sovereignty that has not often formed a significant feature of contemporary trauma theory. In the figure of *homo sacer* we are confronted with an image of the death, or mere survival, of an individual without political rights. This throws into question some of the legitimizing narratives of nation building and liberal democracy that dominate both mass media representations and certain theorizations of trauma and media.

Today's trauma theory emerged from a conjunction of research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with a critique of representation. However, trauma is not only a psychological condition extended into the domain of literary and media texts. It has always formed a central part of psychoanalytic theories of culture. Freud himself extended the concept of trauma beyond the individual to include social collectives at least as early as *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Benjamin and Adorno employed Freud in their critical theory in the 1920s and '30s. For Benjamin and Adorno the then new media of photography and film presented images of a mass culture shaped, on one hand, by a history of revolution and terror and, on the other, by practices of industrial production and consumption. The Freudian account of both individual and collective trauma enabled these critics to develop a critical account of violence, shock and propaganda in mass mediated societies.

In the late 1930s, facing the deepening crisis that would result in World War II and the Holocaust, Freud, Benjamin and Adorno all developed somewhat different theories of historical trauma. In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) Freud attempted to explain Jewish identity with reference to the collective trauma of the murder of the primal father and the psychic impact of monotheistic faith. Benjamin made Freud's theory of shock (as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920]) part of his own account of modern urban experience and photography. Adorno devised a critique of Wagner's music using psychoanalytic terms, including traumatic memory and compulsive repetition, that he would later extend in his critique of mass culture. After the war Adorno, following Benjamin's theses on history as catastrophe, proposed that Auschwitz constituted a trauma for philosophical thought. In the postwar period Roland Barthes also returned to the problem of trauma in his various essays on photography. Many of these texts serve as an ongoing reference for more recent work in trauma studies. However, recent research on trauma and media is concerned primarily with visual evidence, testimony and commemoration. What these

earlier texts provide are more comprehensive philosophical and historical accounts of the relation between political violence, modern media and collective identity.

While I do not claim that these critics present us with models that can simply be "applied" to today's culture, I propose that they offer important precedents for a theory of historical trauma that addresses today's culture of mediated violence and terror. In order to extend their contemporary relevance I read their writings with reference to Agamben's biopolitical theory of sovereignty. By showing that these founding texts of trauma theory are preoccupied with what Agamben calls "bare life" (the reduction of the human individual to mere biological existence), I demonstrate how trauma is embedded in larger ideological formations. Identification and/or empathy with the victim often assumes a progressive liberal account of social relations. The Freudian concept of trauma, however, reveals repressed violence to be the basis of both individual and group identity. The question of political violence and sovereign power are also central to Benjamin's and Adorno's uses of Freud. Today we need to extend the insights of these earlier thinkers and pursue a geopolitical analysis of the ways trauma discourse may participate in structures of power and exclusion.

I pursue these issues further in a series of readings of these theorists and in discussions of two iconic traumas of modern media: the Holocaust and the events of September 11, 2001. Numerous studies of the limits and ethics of Holocaust representation have cited Adorno's proposition that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34) without seeking any further engagement with Adorno's work. Yet Adorno made psychoanalytic theory part of his critique of fascism, both before and after Auschwitz. In *Minima Moralia* (1951) Adorno wrote that "the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself" (16), anticipating Agamben's argument that the camp is the archetypal political space of modernity (*Homo Sacer* 166). Debates about Holocaust representation have sometimes missed the larger stakes of Adorno's and Agamben's propositions: that the radical reduction of individual freedom and agency is intrinsic to the biopolitical regimes of the modern state and capitalist economy. Trauma discourse itself participates in a therapeutic understanding of experience that forms part of medical and managerial modes of surveillance and control. The relation between trauma and bare life is explicit in the experience of the Holocaust, but may seem less obvious in the case of 9/11. Both media professionals and academic critics responded to the 9/11 attacks by claiming a "traumatic" status for those events. In this way trauma discourse did more to reconstitute national identity than to consider the larger significance of the annihilation of civilian populations through terrorist violence.

Whereas trauma studies is mostly preoccupied with testimonial texts and documentary images, it remains haunted by the presence of a more general media culture. At least since the publication of Shoshana Felman's

and Dori Laub's *Testimony* (1992), contemporary trauma studies has included analyses of film and video texts along with works of literature. But the testimony of Holocaust survivors discussed in Felman's and Laub's book were exceptional cases. *Testimony* appeared to assume the common criticism that news and entertainment media commodify human suffering and transform viewers into indifferent voyeurs. Then the events of September 11, 2001, brought the representation of traumatic experience right to the center of contemporary media culture in new and dramatic ways. After 9/11 the experience of collective trauma was extended in more direct ways to media viewers. Researchers attempted to find evidence of psychological disturbance among those who had seen the terrorist attacks and their aftermath on television (Young 28–33; Furedi 12–16). More importantly, the mass media itself almost immediately spoke of the events as traumatic for both Americans and the Western world in general (Sreberny 223). Cultural critics and academic theorists gave added weight to this interpretation by applying the terms of already established discourses of trauma and witnessing to account for the impact of the shocking events.

9/11 presented itself instantaneously as a paradigmatic case for media studies. The rapid transmission of the catastrophe to a global audience via "live" television and the Internet, along with the spectacular nature of the collapse of the twin towers, gave the events iconic status among media representations of actual occurrences. However, as commentators in the media and academia were quick to point out, the events bore an uncanny resemblance to numerous Hollywood disaster movies and apocalyptic fantasies. Those who interpreted 9/11 in terms of its traumatic impact stressed the gap between the immediacy of the media images and the ability of the public to make sense of the events, or even to believe what they were seeing. However, the sense that the events had somehow already been visualized before they happened suggested the appropriateness of an approach that drew from Freud, who had emphasized the role of fantasy and desire in the construction of events as traumatic. Such interpretations were readily offered by cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Slavoj Žižek. The tension between these two approaches to trauma and representation, which came into such high relief after 9/11, is one of the ongoing concerns of this book.

The 9/11 attacks also gave rise to a new rhetoric of good versus evil, civilization versus barbarism, and 'us' versus 'them.' The former terms in this series of binaries could be once again openly applied to America and first-world countries and the second terms in the series to its strategic enemies. Islamic fundamentalism was portrayed as the nemesis of liberal democracy and human progress. Reeling in shock from an unexpected violation of their apparent immunity from violent destruction, many Western intellectuals missed an important opportunity to engage in a critique of global power and inequality. As Jacques Derrida commented, the rapidity with which 9/11 was spoken of as a "traumatic event" effectively negated a deeper reflection

on and more gradual working-through of its political significance (Borradori 93). The communities of grieving and mourning that quickly formed through the aid of news media and other information networks tended to put aside political analysis in response to a perceived need for empathy and human solidarity. How should we understand the responsibility of critical intellectuals in such a dramatic situation? A sense of national identity, or identification with the West, emerged strongly in many intellectuals' responses to 9/11, including those involved in contemporary trauma studies. 9/11 was certainly, in Benjamin's memorable phrase, a "moment of danger" in which the "true image of the past" must be seized from uncritical narratives of progress and homogeneous constructions of historical time (4: 391–395). The moment of danger is also a moment of possibility—potentially enabling new insights into the past and new projects for different futures.

TRAUMA AND MEDIA

Psychological theories of trauma have explained how the experience of physical harm or life-threatening situations can cause individuals to suffer behavioral and memory disorders over extended periods of time. Today film, television and the Internet regularly show violence and catastrophe in the most vivid ways. Whereas the impact of these representations has been an ongoing concern in media research it would appear most people have learned to live with representations of extreme violence without suffering obvious psychological effects. Exposure to media alone is not a sufficient cause of traumatization. Nevertheless, the price of this exposure may be an emotional and intellectual disengagement with the wider world and even a "psychic numbing" that is itself listed as a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. However interesting the question of the psychic impact of media may be, recent research on trauma and representation has tended to pursue different directions. Contemporary trauma theory, as developed by critics such as Felman and Caruth, is concerned with the paradoxical nature of traumatic memory and the crises it poses for conventional understandings of historical narrative, truth and representation. Drawing from both the psychiatric category of PTSD and Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma theory explores the ways that trauma's temporality constitutes an event that is always displaced in space and time. Trauma may not be consciously registered at the time of its occurrence but it returns in the form of intrusive memories, nightmares, compulsive acting-out and flash-backs. Caruth has called trauma a "symptom of history" ("Introduction" 5), suggesting both a direct, yet often inaccessible, link with the past. In contemporary Western culture images of violence and catastrophe are consumed as part of normal everyday life. So when academic critics make the representation of trauma an index of historical truth and authenticity we need to situate such claims in broader cultural contexts.

Beyond the initial question of the possibly traumatic effects of media, contemporary trauma studies addresses the specific communities that are created through the collective experience of, or collective relation to, traumatic events. Film theorist E. Ann Kaplan proposes that "trauma produces new subjects" (Kaplan 1); that is, it produces new forms of political identification based in different experiences of victimhood, shared suffering and witnessing. This interest in trauma as the basis of shared identity is also characteristic of broader cultural trends outside the academy. Despite the proliferation of images of war, torture, genocide and natural disaster in Western news media, certain events, such as the Holocaust or 9/11, have become iconic cultural traumas—relived and retold in numerous documentaries and dramatizations. Commentators suggest we are living in a "trauma culture" in which "extremity and survival are privileged markers of identity" (Luckhurst 2).[2] The application of psychoanalytic concepts and methods to the study of modern media has a long and complex history, and it is not surprising that recent research into trauma and testimony has quickly become part of the study of film, television and photojournalism. World War II, the Holocaust and the Vietnam War have been common subjects for popular film, whereas more recent events, such as the September 11 attacks or the death of Lady Diana Spencer, have been rapidly translated into film and television dramas. While some critics describe these representations of human suffering as kitsch, others argue that they constitute popular and influential representations of history. These debates have carried over to trauma theory. Critics such as Felman and Caruth stress the impossibility of adequately representing traumatic experience. For this they have been accused of making trauma the experience of only particular groups or granting trauma a quasi-religious status. In contrast film scholars E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang argue that a choice must be made "between inadequate telling and the relegating of trauma to a mystified silence" (Kaplan and Wang 12). They propose, instead, a range of different positions for relating to traumatic experience in film, including vicarious traumatization, voyeurism and empathetic identification (9–11).

Insofar as traumatic experience becomes the measure by which we attempt to evaluate media representations we may neglect to consider the larger questions that underline our understanding of trauma and memory, such as the shifting historical relations between technology and optical experience. Ever since photographs were first used to document the physical states of hysterics in Jean Martin Charcot's clinic or the horrific deaths and injuries suffered in World War I, the literal representation of traumatic experience has always been only one side of the relation between trauma and media. Benjamin compared photography to the ways that human consciousness attempts to deflect potentially traumatic shock and emphasized the ways media technologies served to attune experience to new rhythms and speeds of modernity. Photography, he argued, is the mnemonic device that has replaced the long memory characteristic of more stable societies, localized communities and