

CHAPTER THREE
 FILM, TRAUMA
 AND THE ENUNCIATIVE PRESENT

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Prologue: Silence and Speech

Two tendencies—apparently similar but in fact quite contradictory—run like an undercurrent through trauma studies. The first is a compulsion to repeat; the second a compulsion to recount.

The compulsion to repeat is an often-documented aftermath of trauma—the survivor of trauma going over and over in minute detail the events of the traumatic situation. Tied to the vivid nature of traumatic memory, itself a correlate of the extraordinary quality of present-ness of survival situations, and no doubt biologically wired in by the endocrinal responses of the adrenaline cycle, the compulsion to repeat has at its heart an awareness of failure. Preoccupied with the details of an event, the gap between the details and what actually happened haunts these attempts to somehow, through repetition, understand the nature of the fracturing that occurred in the traumatic moment and to somehow repair it.¹ At the heart of this repetition is a silence.

The compulsion to recount, found in those one step removed from trauma and trying to understand it, is plagued by a similar failure, but here the failure comes not from the knowledge that the recitation never quite grasps the nature of trauma, but from an expectation that coming face-to-face with the “facts of the case” will provide such an understanding. In these accounts, there is often a focus on the importance of testimony, on laying out, blow-by-blow in intimate detail, the horrors that were enacted.

A paradox underlies these contradictory impulses, one closely tied to the question of knowledge. A pivotal aspect of major trauma, and the

¹ This is in no way to discount experiences of dissociation; these are two sides of the same coin. The psychic mechanism that takes over to produce dissociation signals to the intolerability of such acute presentness.

“unspeakability” of it, is that the survivor has knowledge of something that nobody should know—a knowledge that potentially tears at the social fabric and ruptures the fundamental existential ground of existence in one’s own body. Traumatic events that assault the integrity of this existence in the body fracture something that we do not even know we have until it is gone. Trauma ruptures something that is so fundamental to our existence as human subjects that we don’t even begin to grasp it until we lose it.² To try to describe this encounter with one’s own annihilation is to come up against the limitations of our conceptual vocabulary in thinking about who and what we are to start with. We could try to describe this as facing an existential abyss, but the existential is a philosophical concept that in most articulations does not encompass the fully somatic depth of experience.³

The paradox, given this knowledge that no human should know, is the attempt among those one step removed but committed, for ethical and political reasons, to understanding trauma, to try to know it. And perhaps this intolerable knowledge is at the core of the “unspeakability” of trauma.⁴ Indeed, this raises the question—if the searchers truly understood,

² This claim is a complex one. How does it accommodate the increasingly widespread nature of trauma? Is this to proclaim the tragedy of some kind of lost innocence, which is more a privilege than a norm, and how then can we define human subjectivities marked by trauma? Any ethical work on trauma must acknowledge and respect the resilience, resourcefulness and courage of “survivors.” On the other hand, unless a politics of trauma can fully grasp and articulate what the damage is and why it is so unacceptable—in other words, unless it takes the benchmark of the non-traumatised subject as a measure, it will have no way to conceptualise what atrocity is and why it must be unveiled and prevented.

³ Clearly there are many different types of trauma. The term “trauma” encompasses both “threshold” survival experiences and experiences that do not necessarily stem from atrocity or extremity. While the inclusiveness of the term is important to theorising the nature of trauma, to some extent it precludes discussions that recognise different degrees of traumatisation. I find Dominick La Capra’s suggestion that the term be reserved for experiences above a certain threshold a very useful one to allow for meaningful distinctions to be made between liminal experiences that threaten either physical or psychic disintegration and more common “quotidian” forms of traumatic experience that may be accrued during a lifetime. The “threat of one’s own annihilation” here refers more to these forms of extreme trauma. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁴ For Herman, “unspeakability” is a primary characteristic of trauma; this is a contested claim in the literature, but one that I agree with. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1994).

in a fully embodied way, what is at the heart of trauma, would this not initiate them into its wraith-like embrace?

This silence is often theorized as shame. Certainly shame may be in the mix—like the layers of an onion, trauma becomes compounded, overlaid with social dimensions and the difficult associations that memory accrues. Like peeling back the layers of an onion, one can work back through these accumulated resonances, but it may never release the stranglehold of the initial shattering. If trauma is understood as a kind of “piercing of the psychic shield,” then the impact of major trauma is in the Humpty Dumpty-like inability to put the pieces back together.⁵ This is not to say that they cannot be re-integrated, but surely this must be central to the goal of any trauma studies: the hope that, through adequately conceptualizing the nature of the shattering, it would be possible to find a pathway through the damage toward healing and equilibrium. This is what is at stake in the theorization of trauma. At the sharp edge of the failure to understand this is the wreckage of individuals, communities and indeed whole nations battling it out with only their survival instincts available, or perhaps worse, having given up after repeated ineffectual professional attempts at “resolution” of the trauma.

The silence itself is complex and may involve as much a refusal to talk as an impossibility. Firstly, there is a desire to protect the listener; to tell can feel like smearing the listener with faeces, and this is where disgust comes into play—a sense of taboo, of defilement. The refusal to tell can also involve a refusal to take into oneself the image of the traumatic event, as if to tell is to own or identify with an image of oneself that is incompatible with psychic survival, and to provide the listener with such images may feel like inviting them to view the teller in this frame. This is where shame is paramount, and insulating such images, keeping them at a distance, is a defense against this. A third factor is the ever-present question of re-traumatization. This is the danger of proximity, and fear is its characteristic—as speech comes closer to the core of the trauma, anxiety increases exponentially in the face of the threat of reviving the original presentness. Laura Marks has written of a language that comes close enough to the event to “ignite [...in a] flash of embodied meaning.”⁶ In the context of aesthetics, this is the aspiration that animates the work, the Holy Grail of an affective art practice. In the context of trauma, it is the black hole that threatens to suck the teller into it.

⁵ I am grateful to Magdalena Zolkos for this phrase.

⁶ Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 141. Marks here refers to the ideas of both Walter Benjamin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

This is the paradox of silence. In a sense, this silence at the heart of trauma also sacralizes the event, rendering it inaccessible and protecting it from any scrutiny that might unravel the tight knots that wrap around it like a protective cocoon.

1. A Question of Enunciation

Underlying these issues is a question of the relationship between language and experience. These are two parallel lines, or at best an asymptote.⁷ A fuller recognition of this disparity would fundamentally shift the understanding of trauma. In particular, this raises the question of the complex nature of the enunciative acts that underpin trauma studies as a practice: who speaks, who listens, and how is the speech act formulated?

Despite the existence of foundational primary texts written or spoken by those whom Dominick LaCapra refers to as “primary witnesses”—those who speak *as* the victim/survivor—much of the discourse is presented from the perspective of the “secondary witness.”⁸ Despite LaCapra’s injunction against the assumption that a secondary witness can “inhabit” the experience of the traumatised,⁹ much of this work takes the form of speaking *for* the victim. In some cases this may be mandated, as it may involve an ethical commitment to the dead, but it may also adopt a relatively unreflective position of speaking for the other, who may be assumed to be absent but still living. In some of the literature on trauma this position is a self-reflexive one. Ann Kaplan writes that, “most of us most of the time experience trauma in the ‘secondary’ rather than direct position.”¹⁰ At least this account of the vicarious encounter with trauma acknowledges its assumptions, albeit speaking for and to an “us” that by its nature excludes the survivor from the community of listeners/viewers (and speakers).¹¹

This assumption that the “we” who speak and listen are secondary or tertiary witnesses insulates the discourse from a primary point of reference, for an acknowledgement that survivors may be among those who speak,

⁷ Converging lines that never meet.

⁸ Dominick LaCapra, “Lanzmann’s ‘Shoah’: ‘Here There is No Why,’” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1997).

⁹ LaCapra himself cites Shoshana Felman as exemplary of this tendency. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰ E. Anna Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 39.

¹¹ Kaplan does spell out the differences between these differences.

listen and have a stake in the discourse automatically raises the bar of accountability. On the one hand, they may serve as an arbiter of the kind of knowledge or understanding claimed by the speaker. On the other hand, the presence of survivors among an audience demands that an ethically committed speaker be aware of the dynamics of his/her own speech.

When detailed accounts of atrocity are not simply presented as sensationalist exploitation pieces, as is common in media/journalistic work, the ethics of the accounts are most often articulated as the importance of "bearing witness," a sense of solidarity with victims/survivors and the courage to face up to the evidence of atrocity. In attempts of secondary witnesses to convey this to listeners/readers, description—the blow-by-blow recounting of facts, details, specifics—comes to the fore as a rhetorical strategy for rendering unthinkable events concrete and affective, in order to bring the trauma alive to the secondary listener. Conversely, this very strategy can meet an entirely different reception among survivors. These detailed accounts, in themselves, can be potent triggers of traumatic associations in survivors.¹²

On one level, no analysis of language or the image itself can address this dynamic, as this is about particular subjects, configurations of trauma and the variability of memory. No one can predict the sense memory that may trigger a breakthrough of traumatic memory into the present. It may be a piece of music, a gesture, a smell, a word, water, darkness, a story, a doorway, fire, a helicopter... This is a key feature of what LaCapra calls the "afterlife of trauma." On another level, despite this unpredictability one can assume that direct accounts of atrocity can be especially disturbing to some trauma survivors. The way this process plays out in mediated culture is especially complex, and the omnipresence of mediated images and accounts of war and sexual violence can play a potent role in reinscribing, on a daily basis, the memory of trauma in those who have experienced it.¹³

¹² The ambivalence around this bearing witness has been explored in depth in the context of photojournalism. See, for example, Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹³ This is not to imply that survivors live in a constant state of victimhood, but their resilience can be assaulted in ways that bring trauma to the fore in the present. Bennett cites the artist Charlotte Delbo who talks of having different selves—her present-day self and her "Auschwitz self." Both co-exist like layers but the "Auschwitz self" can re-emerge painfully into the present under certain conditions. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 25.

Censorship cannot provide an answer to this dilemma, but an inclusive ethics of address alert to this dynamic and recognizing the diversity of listeners would mandate a very different approach. This might start from the recognition that atrocity is an act; trauma is an experience. While acts may be described, the experience of trauma may be "unshareable even when communicated."¹⁴ Detailed accounts of atrocity conflate the experience with the act, as if the act can explain/stand in for the experience, but there is no way it can do that. No amount of detail can lead someone to an understanding of something that is totally outside the range of anything they have ever experienced. This demands an acknowledgement of what cannot be said—of the gaps, elisions and impossibilities of speech, the partial nature of it. This defies the assumption that what can be said in language can engender a knowledge, can render the experience available to the listener/spectator. As Susan Sontag writes of the experience of primary witnesses:

We—this we is everyone who has never experienced anything like what [survivors] went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying it was; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.¹⁵

Miriam Marquez, a survivor of torture at the hands of the Pinochet regime, explicitly links her experience as a witness to a question of an unfathomable knowledge:

It's completely foreign, it's completely impossible to adjust what you are and what you have learned to the world you know... Everything you could imagine of my world... was burnt in that moment.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 125.

¹⁶ Alejandra Canales, *A Silence Full of Things*, 2005, <http://vimeo.com/3504830> (accessed June 22, 2012). Recent work on mirror neurons provides a neurological basis to understand this differential quality in spectators' experience of images of torture. In Canales' film, the image does not attempt to represent the trauma, does not assume to be able to bridge the gap between the said and the known. There is a voice that gives a scanty account of the events but the images are only small fragments—hands, feet, piss. It is Marquez who is present, who speaks—not an assumed encounter with her traumatic experience. The film recognizes Marquez as the subject who has lived these atrocities and their aftermath. The spectator has a

How much more unknowable is the experience of survivors, such as Marquez, who are not just witnesses to the violation of others, but whose own bodies have been the target of the violation? How much more profound is the "piercing of the psychic shield" when even one's own body is not a refuge, a base, a carapace for a fragile subjectivity?¹⁷ Why would we assume that language has the capacity to communicate the experience of an assault on the body that can produce a fragmentation or disintegration of subjectivity?

Many survivors are quite capable of talking about the events they have experienced. There is often a toughness, a resilience, a kind of grim frankness with each other in the face of the knowledge that has been thrust upon them. But, as Jill Bennett points out, this knowledge has an "inside" and an "outside."¹⁸ It may be possible to talk about the outer shell that comprises facts, events, details, as if an external witness, but the inside is a different matter. For Bennett, one of the goals of trauma-related artwork is to "put insides and outsides into contact."¹⁹ This project of "speaking from the inside" is an entirely different one to the project of a trauma studies articulated from and for the position of the "secondary witness."

In his penetrating analysis of Claude Lanzmann's epic documentary, *Shoah*, Dominick LaCapra unveils the dynamic of eliciting details from a survivor in order to produce an affective experience for the spectator, to instigate knowledge and empathy in the secondary or tertiary witness.²⁰ In a scene in which a barber, Abraham Bomba, tells of his experience in Auschwitz, Lanzmann prods the survivor to speak to the point at which the possibility of detached discourse breaks down and the presentness of traumatic memory erupts through the surface of the discourse. Here testimony serves the interests of history, rather than those of the survivor. What was the aftermath of this interview for Bomba and how would other survivors respond to witnessing this intrusive style of interview? This

connection with her, and a sense of the transgressive/fracturing nature of trauma but no sense of fullness, no illusion of having lived through it.

¹⁷ This is not to claim a "hierarchy" of trauma, but a specificity of certain kinds of trauma.

¹⁸ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 22 and following pages.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ LaCapra is careful to qualify this critique, declaring his respect for Lanzmann's film, which he describes as a "masterpiece."

question does not arise in the construction of testimony that is aimed to produce an empathetic engagement in viewers as "secondary witnesses."²¹

In the context of the image, debates around the ethics of representation have been most commonly articulated in terms of the question of "showing or not showing."²² These debates have been well rehearsed in both studies and documentary theory.²³ Where the discussion shifts the debate away from representation per se to consider the relation between representation and spectatorship, to consider dynamics of watching or receiving mediated accounts or images of trauma, it has often focused on the idea of "secondary traumatization," particularly in attempts to differentiate the experience of "empathic trauma" from that of survivors.²⁴ The work on reception has also considered the complex and ambivalent dynamics of witnessing—what it means to be an ethical spectator, what an empathic witness can do with the information and affect that images of atrocity convey and the work of meaning-making that needs to be done to process these images.²⁵ My concern here is not with the image per se, or the showing/not showing binary, but to understand filmic affect in trauma-related work within an ethics of address.

Speech and Affect

A woman speaks to an interviewer of the experience of finding her son hanging from a tree.²⁶ As her account approaches the moment of trauma, her voice drops to a raspy whisper, the sentences cryptic, her body very

²¹ In so far as LaCapra focuses on this process of triggering a traumatic reliving, his focus is on the production of the film, not its reception, and in so far as he considers the question of spectatorship, the spectator is not a survivor.

²² Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List is not Shoah: the Second Commandment, Popular Modernism and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996), 302.

²³ See, for example, *ibid.*, 301 on the un-representability of horror; also Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*; and Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images Malgré Tout* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2003).

²⁴ Bennett gives a brief resume of this debate, citing Geoffrey Hartmann's discussion of so-called "secondary traumatization." Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 35. See also Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*.

²⁵ See, Anna Gibbs, "Horrorified: Embodied Vision, Media Affect And The Images," in *Interrogating the War on Terror*, ed. Deborah Staines (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007). Gibbs specifically addresses questions around photography and the images of torture at Abu Ghraib prison.

²⁶ I do not have any details of this interview, seen on Australian television some time in 2010/11. It was this moment that made an impact, registered in the affective memory, and all other details have receded.

still. Whatever it takes for her to speak these words, it is not a detached translation of trauma into language. The words are just a cipher that catches at the moment, suggests it and drops it into the space between the woman and the interviewer. Many viewers may be insensitive to this moment, but for viewers attuned to the dynamics of trauma, this moment can prompt recognition of the intensities that surround speech. The communication takes place across a gap that can be an abyss of understanding. The gulf between the spoken word and the embodied memory has a palpable presence here. The affective contagion that passes across that gap and across the screen to the viewer happens not through the words but through the silences that inhabit them and through the non-verbal registers of voice, eye and gesture. Writing these words, I am aware that I could be describing a performance, a stylized rendition of traumatic memory staged for the camera, but this is no such staging. This is not merely a question of recourse to the performative codes of affective presence.

In a sense, language meets a taboo, a sense of boundaries that should not be crossed. This signals to the complex duality of language. As representation, language stands in for that which is absent: it marks a gap. As enunciation, language can carry an unbearable presence, can assume a plenitude, marked by an affective undercurrent that presses up from below, threatening to break through the controlled structures of language or narrative. This is the contradictory dialectic of language.

Speech that is not marked by affect, not riven through with the intensities of the act of enunciation, in a sense lets the listener off the hook. Speech that is marked by dissociation—the repression or protective blocking of affect—can strike the sensitive listener/viewer with a sense of that absence—of the sucking in of energy around the abyss. But the depersonalized speech that characterizes so much of academic work, based as it is on an assumed faith in the signficatory power of words, the linear unfolding of a discourse, the dispassionate theorization of trauma as historical or socio/psychic phenomenon, is often founded not on this energetic dynamic but on its absence, as if speech and listening are buttoned up and don't reverberate into the affective bodily memory of the listener.

Not only does this lack of understanding let the listener off the hook; it also lets the speaker off the hook: she/he who can speak without awareness that words can unleash these undercurrents, who can move on to the next thing unscathed. It is as if anything can be said with impunity.

In a public lecture, in the interests of restoring the historical record, a speaker tells of a terrible atrocity committed on a child.²⁷ No detail is spared. She speaks with gravitas, holding the audience in the moment. And yet, she segues, apparently effortlessly, onto the next point. In the space of barely five minutes she is jocular, loquacious. How is this possible? This is what Bennett describes as a “failure to witness.”²⁸ The speaker has lost a sense that some things exist in another register and this should be respected. Approaching them in a pedestrian way—in a “normal” register of discourse—implies acceptability, negating the special care with which they need to be treated.

In a therapeutic context, the “existential engagement”²⁹ of the therapeutic relationship is paramount in attempts to provide a space to close the gap between affect and enunciation. As the discourse of trauma moves out of the clinical context and into concerns with history and public memory, this fundamental awareness of an ethics of care around speech and its reception loses its primacy.³⁰

Facts can vibrate; they can give off colors, sounds, smells, images. To talk of these facts with no recognition of this is to lack any awareness of the act of enunciation, of the gaps between language and experience and the unpredictable ways that sparks can break out of language, leap across the gap and ignite the tinderbox of traumatic memory.

An insect buzzing around a flower sees colors, shades and contrasts completely invisible to the human eye. Only with ultraviolet light can we humans simulate the perceptual experience of an insect. Like the insect attuned to a differently-marked perceptual world, the trauma survivor picks up resonances imperceptible to the unaffected, their residue reverberating through the fractures in the psychic shield.

In Alejandra Canales' documentary film, *A Silence Full of Things*, trauma survivor Miriam Marquez encapsulates this understanding:

People who don't know about torture can look at the Iraqi man with a hood on his head and his arms outstretched and be completely insensitive to that

²⁷ The speaker, who shall remain anonymous, was talking of events in early colonial Australian history.

²⁸ Bennett writes, “a kind of failure to witness can result from viewing disturbing images under conditions that precisely don't compel one's continued involvement.” Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 64.

²⁹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 147.

³⁰ This disparity highlights a significant fault-line in trauma studies as an interdisciplinary field.

image because people don't know the noise, the smells of that image. Who can imagine this horror? No one can imagine this horror.³¹

2. Affect, Aesthetics and Trauma

In her consideration of the nexus between trauma and aesthetic practice, Jill Bennett shifts the focus from traumatic event to the nature of post-traumatic memory.³² Drawing on Bessel van der Kolk's assertion that "traumatic memory is of a 'non-declarative' type, involving bodily responses that lie outside verbal-semantic-linguistic representation," Bennett argues the limitations of both narrative and documentary film, on the grounds that both assume the primacy of signification and the importance of identification with character.³³ Narrative film, she argues, relies on a realist interpretation based on characterization, and in documentary, character "can be said to interpellate witnesses into a particular kind of sympathetic relationship."³⁴

Following Bertolt Brecht and trauma theorists such as LaCapra, Bennett argues against a "crude empathy"³⁵ that blurs the boundaries between the experience of the trauma survivor and the sympathetic engagement of viewers. She cites LaCapra's call for a more nuanced, self-reflexive form of empathy that recognizes and maintains the differentiation between "the trauma that resists representation" and the experience of spectators—one that avoids the "assimilation of the other's experience to the self."³⁶ Bennett herself takes a different tack. In her account, the absence of character or direct reference prevents any recourse to crude empathy, and she privileges forms of experimental contemporary art that "[bear] the imprint of trauma" but eschew both the politics of testimony and the realist assumption that art can "capture and transmit" the experience of trauma.³⁷ This imprint, she argues, resides in the non-significatory affective charge of the work:

³¹ Canales, *Silence*.

³² Bennett writes that "the art of sense memory [...] does not make a claim to represent originary trauma—the cause of the feeling—but to enact state or experience of post-traumatic memory." Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 40.

³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10. Bennett cites Brecht.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23; 3. Bennett does not proscribe character altogether, giving credence to artworks that present "character as flow," rather than as narrativised objects of empathetic identification.

Affect in art does not operate at the level of arousing sympathy for predefined characters; it has a force of its own [...] it goes beyond reinforcing the moral emotions that shape responses to a particular narrative scenario.³⁸

Bennett works with a Deleuzian-inflected concept of affect as intensity aroused by sensation and she emphasizes the need to resist art that produces "meaning rather than body."³⁹ Bennett claims that this sensory intensity elicits thought, leading to a critical engagement with the material that is "more complex and considered than a purely emotional or sentimental reaction."⁴⁰ She describes this critical aesthetic engagement as "empathic vision."⁴¹ Bennett argues that:

the value of Deleuze's notion that affect is produced as intensity by formal means rather than by narrative is that it allows us to understand affect as something other than an emotional response to character and thus to address the limitations of a narrative organization that contains affect within certain corporeal and moral boundaries.⁴²

Bennett argues persuasively that experimental art can produce an affective encounter, a somatic experience of something that is not named but registers the "force of trauma."⁴³ She describes this evocatively as "transactive rather than communicative."⁴⁴ However, the argument that our response to narrative is necessarily subsumed or contained into moral emotions connected to character relies on a very limited model of narrative and an assumption that narrative film is univocal. Whereas both narrative and documentary have the potential to submerge affective experience within narrativized renditions of character and emotion, they also have the potential to work in much more flexible ways than this, and recognizing this opens up more generative ways of thinking about how different types of film can engage with traumatic affect.

This narrow way of understanding narrative film is not an uncommon one; indeed, an emphasis on the pivotal role of character and plot is central to the key paradigm of "classical narrative cinema" that held primacy in film studies for several decades. This paradigm rests on an assumed

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7; 10. Bennett cites Maurice Blanchot.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 46 and following pages.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

hierarchy in which all aesthetic and affective dimensions of the film serve to bolster the causal chain of narrative events driven by character goals. Similarly, conventional theoretical models of documentary film have privileged the production of meaning and marginalized the operations of affect. However, both of these truisms have sustained widespread challenges over several decades of film theory that has argued that cinema has a body and cinematic experience is embodied.⁴⁵

In a summation of a broad-ranging rethinking of the nature of narrative cinema, that inverts this assumed hierarchy, Miriam Hansen draws sensory-affective experience into center stage in the understanding of film narrative. Hansen argues that what has become known as “classical narrative cinema” in fact operates as “a scaffold, matrix, or web that allows for a wide range of aesthetic effects and experiences.”⁴⁶ Similarly, the understanding of documentary as a “discourse of sobriety,” in which affect is anathema to the desire for knowledge, has been systematically challenged by both new forms of “performative documentary” and emerging discourses around the role of affect and embodied spectatorship in documentary cinema.⁴⁷ Understanding the experience of cinema as intrinsically embodied and affective opens up a more flexible way of thinking about how film can engage with trauma. Hansen moves away from questions of representation tied up with the image to approach film as a fully “aesthetic” medium, that is, a medium that works with all of the senses and sensory experience.⁴⁸ Affect depends on the viewer: if we understand affect as a relation, then we need to consider that relation with a fully embodied spectator.

⁴⁵ See for example, Marks, *The Skin*, Vivien Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Anne Rutherford, “What Makes a Film Tick?”: *Cinematic Affect, Materiality and Mimetic Innervation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

⁴⁶ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 339.

⁴⁷ The term “performative documentary” comes from Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994). For an extended discussion of these debates in documentary, see Anne Rutherford, “The Poetics of a Potato: Documentary that Gets Under the Skin,” *Metro* 137 (2003). The term “discourse of sobriety” comes from influential early documentary theorist and practitioner, John Grierson.

⁴⁸ Hansen refers here to Walter Benjamin’s definition of *aisthitikos*, from the Greek, as “a discourse of the body.”

Explorations of the materiality of cinematic experience, which argue the embodied basis of cinematic experience, open up more generative understandings of how film can awaken that “tactile, sensuous mode of perception” central to what Walter Benjamin calls mimetic experience.⁴⁹ For early film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, film constantly hooks into or “pushes downwards”⁵⁰ into embodied experience. For many contemporary film theorists this capacity to awaken a heightened embodied experience is at the core of how film works to draw the spectator into an affective mimetic engagement with film, whether narrative, documentary or experimental.

Film is polyvocal. The enunciative strategies of film are complex: they are dispersed across all the embodied dimensions of sound, image, movement, rhythm, pace and color that make up the polyvocal medium of cinema. If we understand narrative as a “scaffold,” we can begin to identify the pulse of narrative film that constantly dips down into the materiality of embodied experience. If we explore the movement back and forward between body and narrative, between materiality and the virtuality of story, we can start to understand another layer of how both narrative and documentary film can engage the spectator that cannot be reduced to mechanisms of characterization. These are embodied but uncodified intensities that run as undercurrents, parallel streams, interwoven voices that drive the oscillatory dynamics of narrative. They are the same dimensions that drive experimental work in its evocation of traumatic affect. Both narrative and documentary have the potential to engage with the experience of trauma and post-traumatic memory in ways that deploy all of these polyvocal dimensions. To accept that affect cannot be reduced to representation does not mean that it is incompatible with representation or narrative; it is just of a different order.

Rather than a simple binary—narrative *or* affect; semantics *or* somatics—identifying these intensities as dimensions of film through which affect can draw spectators into a heightened sensory-affective engagement can enable ways to explore how these elements are deployed

⁴⁹ Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), no page. Hansen writes that Benjamin’s use of the term dissociates those understandings of mimesis associated with verisimilitude: “beyond naturalist or realist norms of representation and a particular relation (copy, reflection, semblance) of the representation to reality, the mimetic is invoked as a kind of practice that transcends the traditional subject-object dichotomy [...] a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile forms of perception.”

⁵⁰ Miriam Hansen, “‘With Skin and Hair’: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseille 1940,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993), 447.

across a range of film genres that address experiences of trauma. What does it mean to have these affective elements nested in a scaffold of situational context? If narrative gives a frame for that affective dimension to emerge, what is the relationship between content-driven character-dependent emotional engagement and this more amorphous, fluid, material affect?

Brian Massumi's work on affect can be productive for understanding the relations between signifying elements and these material, embodied dimensions.⁵¹ Massumi makes an essential distinction between affect, which he describes as a logic of intensity, and the conventional content-dependent semantic coding of emotion. Massumi argues that affect is "outside this loop [... it is] unassimilable"⁵² to this content. However, Massumi suggests a more complex relationship between affect and semantic content, not an either/or: "language is not simply in opposition to intensity"; they are not incompatible—while linguistic expression can "dampen intensity,"⁵³ it can also resonate with or amplify the affect of the image. This implies that narrative structures do not necessarily annihilate affect. It opens up a sense of two relatively autonomous spheres that can interact with each other, rather than a hierarchy in which one overrides the other.

Rather than a simple equation of affect with sensation, Massumi writes of affect as the perception of one's own vitality, one's own aliveness. As a dimension of experience that is always present in different degrees, this model allows us to think about affect and signification as a "co-presence," to envisage a dialectical tension between the two.

This concept of co-existing but disparate layers provides a framework to think about ways that film registers on many levels operating simultaneously.

When we think about the implications of this for understanding film spectatorship, we need to recognize that a film can produce different kinds of experience: it can be an amalgam of elements that work in different ways and to different ends. Macro models that argue from genre—such as categorical thinking about narrative or documentary—cannot address the subtle and fluid dynamics of how this dialectical tension works in film spectatorship and therefore cannot reveal much about how film can engage with traumatic experience.

⁵¹ Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 219-221.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 219.

Film can contain different kinds of temporality.⁵⁴ Spectators can be split, pulled in different directions. A spectator may be engaged in the linear, causal temporality of the represented diegetic world, but they are drawn into a film moment by moment. This is a very live process constructed in the performative presence of the moment. This can unfold on the micro level of a sound, a camera movement, a space, and it can work with or against narrative dimensions. Embodied experience here is a different kind of knowing.⁵⁵ Elements of a film that privilege either affect or narrative may be sequential, alternating as the film dips into the material building blocks of spectator engagement and harvests that sensory-affective richness back into the narrative. They can also be simultaneous, in complex ways. Intensity and the signifying dimensions of a scenario may contradict each other or they may resonate with each other. Gradations of affect may vary at different points through a film. We need to see films on a continuum with the most prosaic or univocal forms at one end—be they documentary, narrative or experimental—and the most sensorially and corporeally rich, aesthetically expansive and polyvocal at the other.

Bennett calls for attention to specificity in the ways that art can "embody and register trauma."⁵⁶ Equally, we need to explore the unique capacities of embodied, sensory forms of narrativized film to engage traumatic experience. We need to look to more flexible and subtle frameworks to analyze how film can work with affect and how it can be deployed in the engagement with trauma. Rather than a prescriptive approach, it is more productive to see this as a process of experimentation and to look at how diverse films have done this, and what we can learn from them.

Affect and Performativity in Film

Two films—one narrative, one documentary—offer ways of working with the polyvocal dimensions of film to engage with experiences of trauma. Both films work with an inclusive ethics of address to take up the experience of survivors and the dynamics of post-traumatic memory, but each works with testimony in an oblique way, using the performative register to shake loose the realist faith in language and representation and

⁵⁴ These can include narrative time, screen time and duration.

⁵⁵ In Bennett's model, sensory intensity *leads to* thought. I am suggesting here, rather, a concept of "animate thought"—intrinsic to the experience, not subsequent to it.

⁵⁶ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 4.

to provoke an affective embodied engagement with spectators. Each film eschews a matter-of-fact recounting of traumatic event and raises questions about the affective dynamics of testimony for both survivor and spectator.

Bahram Beyzai's film *Bashu (The Little Stranger)*⁵⁷ deploys the phenomenological capacities of cinema to invoke an understanding of the nature of post-traumatic experience. As a fiction film, *Bashu* stands out for the clarity of its understanding of the nature of traumatic memory—its intrusive quality and its eruption across somatic registers. The film is set during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war. Articulated through the figure of an Iranian child, the film has no place for a distanced reflection on the events or a matter-of-fact telling of what happened. The prologue of the film shows the events of the child's family disappearing into the earth under fire from Iraqi bombs, but these are brief fragments, which become inseparable from the child's experience of them. The trauma exists here in its residue in the child, triggered by the sound of explosions, the sight of flames and gestural traces that bring forward flashes of his lost family. *Bashu* is unable to speak at all through the first part of the film. He is a kinetic figure, running, flailing, cowering, a streak of dark skin against the yellow corn, a tiny body in a vast expanse of green fields. When his mute presence finally breaks out into speech, it is not an objective account of facts that breaks forth, but a bodily torrent that comes pouring out of him in words and gestures. In the turning point of the film, that seems to flick a switch in *Bashu* and open up the possibility of his reintegration, this torrent is released kinetically in a frenzied body percussion, infinitely more eloquent than words could be. The sound and rhythm give the moment an overwhelming affect.

Bashu narrativizes this through the catharsis of the body but the film allows a space for intensities that cannot be expressed in the same way through narrative. When *Bashu* finally speaks, his expression defies any linguistic/bodily or cognitive/affective separation, as if this is the condition of speech. His performance draws spectators into a heightened somatic engagement. A conventional narrative approach might argue that this engenders a closer, fuller embodied engagement with character, thereby enhancing the mechanisms of identification, but it is the performative energy of gesture and percussion that is at stake here. The moment unleashes an affective excess that lodges this moment "under the skin," in the embodied memory of spectators, in ways that resist easy assimilation to the diegesis. It breaks through into the present of spectator experience.

⁵⁷ Bahram Beyzai *Bashu*, dir. (*The Little Stranger*), 1986.

This is not to say that all filmic images of the body in the grips of a somatic release would function in this way, rather than being rendered simply as spectacle. In *Bashu*, the energetic economy of the film, particularly the mute, kinetic figuring of *Bashu*, builds to this moment in such a way that the spectator is engaged with the bodily release. It operates both on the cognitive level of narrative and in the affective, energetic dynamics of the spectator.⁵⁸

This is a film that is about much more than trauma: it is equally about difference, prejudice and the redemptive power of emotional bonding. *Bashu* is persecuted by the petty-minded bigots of the village he winds up in, but is fiercely defended by *Naii*, the woman who takes him in. These aspects work clearly on emotional identification with character. The issue of discrimination is explored overtly through dialogue, but the rural village setting of the film opens up the possibility of another level, written into the script, but taking form in the film through the "enunciative present" of sound and gesture rather than speech.⁵⁹ *Bashu*'s protector, *Naii*, lives in an almost animistic exchange with the birds and wild animals of her fields. This exchange is articulated in a heightened awareness of animal presence—an ability to sniff the animals out—and a communication with them through cries, grunts and growls. There is much in the film that remains a riddle, not least this porous boundary between the somatic communication of the animal world and the human. To some extent, the somatic and vocal expression of *Bashu* is nested in this broader aesthetic economy of the film that renders many elements inaccessible to language and gives space to intensities that are not clearly defined and find no equivalent in verbal language enunciation.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The response of spectators to this moment will vary, depending on their prior experience: it speaks in a voice that allows a point of entry to those who know the afterlife of trauma, even as it constructs a scenario for those who do not.

⁵⁹ The framing of this essay within questions of enunciation has been influenced by Raquel Schefer's very interesting discussion of the "enunciative present" in Ruy Guerra's film, *Mueda: Memory and Massacre*. Raquel Schefer, "Re-constitutions. On "Mueda, Memória e Massacre" ("Mueda, Memory and Massacre"), by Ruy Guerra," *Le Journal de La Triennale 4* (May 18, 2012), <http://www.latriennale.org/en/lejournal/you-do-not-stand-one-place-watch-masquerade/re-constitutions-mueda-memoria-e-massacre> (accessed November 1, 2012).

⁶⁰ Negar Mottahedeh situates *Bashu* in the context of the tradition of Ta'ziyeh, a form of ritual Persian theatre. Negar Mottahedeh, "Bahram Bayzai," in *Life and Art: the New Iranian Cinema*, eds. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: National Film Theatre, 1999). According to Peter Chelkowski, in the history of Ta'ziyeh, text was added last: in the traditional form, drama is conveyed wholly or predominantly through music and singing. This contextualisation suggests the

Bashu's location in a village with remnants of folk culture and myth, and its narrative focus on a child, all facilitate the recourse to non-linguistic tropes in a way that is not generalizable into other narrative contexts. However, the film suggests that an expanded narrative repertoire—one which explores more fully all the performative registers of kinetic, vocal, rhythmic, sensory and narrative expression, and their capacity to evoke that which cannot easily be rendered into language—may be a richer seam to mine than more prosaic modes. These registers offer ways of working phenomenologically with film that situates trauma within a narrative context, opening up a recognition of the dynamics of post-traumatic memory at the same time as it signals the unassimilable nature of traumatic experience, thereby opening up a place in the text that addresses the spectator-survivor.

The significance of the performative register also emerges in the Indonesian film, *A Poet*, a stylized documentary re-enactment that commemorates the 1965 massacre of supposed Communist sympathizers that erupted across the Indonesian archipelago.⁶¹ The film is structured around the memories of Acehnese survivor, Ibrahim Kadir, who was accused of being a communist and imprisoned. Kadir is the leader of a *didong* troupe—a group that performs a traditional communal form of sung performance poetry. While a commitment to public memory is paramount here, director Garin Nugroho eschews the disembodied voice of history, choosing to work instead with the emotional registers of the oral tradition of *didong*.⁶² The film starts and ends with the rhythmic pounding and singing of *didong* and *didong* provides a rhythmic current that weaves in and out through the film like a structure of call and response. The film moves back and forth between dramatic sections of recitation or dialogue and musical sections of singing, dancing and clapping.

This is a very hybrid film. To be sure, it works at points specifically to establish identification with character, but there are many more layers to

influence of the performance tradition on this somatic and rhythmic narrative economy of *Bashu*. Peter Chelkowski, *Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), <http://worldcinemadirectory.co.uk/component/film/?id=986> (accessed November 25, 2012).

⁶¹ dir Garin Nugroho, *A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry (Puisi Tak Terkuburkan)* (1999). For details of the purge, in which up to two million people were killed, see Dierdre Griswold, *Indonesia 1965: The Second Greatest Crime of the Century* (New York: World View Publishers, 1979).

⁶² For a detailed analysis of the use of *didong* and the formal strategies of the film, see Rutherford, "Poetics and Politics."

this film that build an affective register that complicates the experience of spectators, at times unsettling an identificatory position as well as affirming it. The film unfolds entirely in the space of two cells and much of it is about the fear of prisoners waiting, listening, being led out to execution. Through the microcosm of one prison cell, the film provides both recognition of what was a communal trauma on a massive scale and empathy with the individual prisoners. At times it slides toward sentimentality and a cello provides mood music. However, *A Poet* draws on a theatrical performance tradition that enhances awareness that this is a staging: a self-reflexive structure dispersed across several interlacing strands of drama, performance and music; a highly stylized use of a restless mobile camera; and a dense and stylized soundscape.⁶³ Theatricality tempers identification. At times the cello is more like a self-conscious mode of punctuation than a parallel to emotional content. The film moves through a set of structured repetitions that enhance an awareness of the structure. Low resolution video adds to the layers that pull the viewer away from a naturalistic viewing.

The performance of Kadir similarly slides across registers. There is a duality at play, as Kadir is both performer and witness/survivor together. At times he is a character in the cell; at times he steps out and becomes himself. Framed alone in a black space, in these few brief moments Kadir gives his testimony. His memories emerge in the film not as facts but as bodily memory—the "crak, crak, crak" sound of bodies being severed by the short sword, and the gesture of the hand that slices head from body. We see just a sliver of his shadowed face through a hole in the wall as his hands repeatedly enact the strike of the sword. In another brief fragment, Kadir asks what it means to be decapitated, enacting the severing of head from body with his hands and breaking down in a kind of crazy laughing, before the film takes us back into the respite of song. Back in the black space of testimony again, he tells of a woman murdered with her baby, and as the memory becomes overwhelming, Kadir enacts the movement of her body rolling, turns his back to the camera, and slides into the performative poetic mode. These ruptures register the impossibility of rendering memory into the standard forms of linguistic discourse or a one-dimensional narrative account. Kadir's performance through gesture and the shift in registers carries the viewer affectively into an engagement with the embodied quality of memory, even as it maintains an awareness of the duality at play, of Kadir as both performer and subject, both inside and outside the role. Proximity and distance co-exist.

⁶³ The actors in the film are both professional members of a theatre troupe and local Acehnese villagers.

There is an ethics underlying this film which is an ethics of care for the survivor, a concern to honor the experience of the survivor—in its fullness—and also a recognition that the film stages the aftermath of a communal trauma shared by many of the viewers. The filmmakers are sensitive to the need to approach trauma with integrity, but without doing violence to the post-traumatic vulnerabilities of viewers. There is not an attempt to spell out all the details of murder and mayhem. The film takes an integrative, healing approach to the trauma, rather than a historical one. Kadir has agency here: rather than prodding and poking him to spell out facts and details, the film allows him to speak selectively and on his own terms, in his own idiom. The performative dimension allows a space to work with the many possible voices of film. There is a recognition of the limited capacity of language to translate or encompass affective traumatic experience, and the staging facilitates an embodied audience engagement with testimony but does not simulate plenitude or completeness in the telling.⁶⁴

An Ethical Practice

Bennett argues that there is a “temporal collapse” in artworks and discourse that focus on the “reduction of trauma to the shock-inducing signifier,” rather than on the duration of post-traumatic memory.⁶⁵ For Bennett, it is crucial to recognize that trauma is not relegated to the past but has an ongoing constitutive role in the present.⁶⁶ While this recognition of the persistence of traumatic effects is of course pivotal, LaCapra’s description of these experiences as the “afterlife of trauma” allows for a more accurate understanding of the fact that trauma can happen in an instant—the moment in which something breaks through the “psychic shield”—and its effects can continue indefinitely. Trauma is both event and condition. At the same time, it is a mistake to assume that the recitation of events can provide an understanding of the individual effects of traumatic experience. Bennett’s focus on art gives another discursive space for a “commitment to registering a sense of the lived experience of traumatic events as a counterbalance to the necessary production of common memory.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Accounts of the production tell of a process of filming marked by tears and grieving. SAPFF, (Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival) 2001 press kit for *A Poet*.

⁶⁵ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 65.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 58. Bennett here is writing of the work of artist, Charlotte Delbo.

In so far as trauma theory aims in part to articulate the ethical, political dimensions of trauma—to understand it as a communal problem and not merely an individual (pathological) one—this focus on testimony and documentation is important, particularly in lifting the burden of shame off an individual and providing a screen on which to project an understanding of larger social and political forces within which the individual has been entrapped. However, despite the explicit ethical commitment of much of this work, the very terms of the discourse can itself lead to an unknowing.

Concepts of discrete affects of guilt, shame and fear open a pathway into understanding emotion and thereby the processes of empathetic identification, and some of the components that may feed into a potentially traumatic situation; but they cannot address the affective “piercing of the psychic shield” that is constitutive of trauma. This term in itself, for all its specificity, does not encompass the embodied ground of “psychic integrity.” We need more flexible, non-categorical ways of thinking about affect and embodied experience to approach this.

By the same token, if we believe that language can encapsulate or express trauma, then it makes sense that the aim of an ethical practice—in discourse or in artwork—is to document events, that this is what bearing witness demands. If we shift attention from representation to the act of enunciation, we can begin to recognize that enunciation is something that is, in itself, fraught. These accounts lodge into a complex mesh of knowledge and memory. If we work backwards from examples of artistic production that acknowledges this, even partially, we can see how opposing assumptions inform other attempts to bear witness to trauma. What would a film look like that is informed by this recognition? If one of the aims of trauma studies is to integrate recognition of atrocity into the public memory, then it must be acknowledged that that public is a plural one that includes both survivors and others. If we start from film and discourse that works with an inclusive ethics of address, it becomes clear how other approaches can unwittingly marginalize survivors in their mode of address. It is when we see an inclusive approach that we can identify the lack in other work.

If we believe that traumatic memory and experience can be translated into language, then that process of representation becomes a desirable one and the normalization of speech around the trauma—the rendering into normal quotidian discourse—is understood as a redemptive process. If, however, we don’t accept this translatability—if we believe that there is a core that eludes representation—then an ethical approach must be entirely different and must involve awareness of the affective dynamics of the enunciative act. This is not prescriptive but suggests certain principles for

an ethical practice. Such dynamics are not specific to the image or to artwork—they are relevant to all discourses of trauma. As much as specific questions about visual culture are pertinent here, the debate must go beyond the question of images to a broader ethics of address.

PART II:
CULTURES

CONTRIBUTORS

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