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On the Nature of the Traumatogenic Event

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Summary

Historical events, however terrible, are not in and of themselves traumatic. For a trauma to emerge at the level of a collectivity, 'social crises must become cultural crises' (Alexander *et al*., 2004, p. 10). For an historical event to become a cultural trauma, it must be socially mediated and represented, a trauma narrative must be constructed. Consequently, there is always a gap between the traumatogenic event and its representation, this gap creates the space for the 'trauma process'. Unlike trauma theory, therefore, cultural trauma places the weight of analysis not on the historical event as such but on the narrative struggle that constitutes and sustains that event as a cultural trauma. Thus, we have a series of interrelated terms: history, trauma, narrative and memory, that pivot around an absent presence, a traumatogenic event. It is the nature of that traumatogenic event that I explore in this paper. First, I will set out my theoretical differences from trauma theory and then attempt to square the circle between a non-pathological conception of trauma in cultural trauma theory and my own commitment to psychoanalysis. In conclusion I will put forward a number of claims that I hope will be consistent with cultural trauma theory. That is to say, the traumatogenic event is not given but is retrospectively constructed and in this sense is *ahistorical* and *non-narrative*.

Keywords: Trauma, Cultural Trauma, Traumatogenic Event, Memory, Narrative, History

One of the central lessons of cultural trauma theory has been that cultural traumas are not given, they are constructed. Historical events, however terrible, are not in and of themselves traumatic. For a trauma to emerge at the level of a collectivity, 'social crises must become cultural crises' (Alexander *et al*., 2004, p. 10). In short, for an historical event to become a cultural trauma, it must be socially mediated and represented, a trauma narrative must be constructed. Consequently, there is always a gap between the traumatogenic event and its representation, this gap is the space of what Ron Eyerman and his colleagues have called the 'trauma process'.

Through this representational process a master narrative of social suffering is created that is critical for a collectivity to identify itself as traumatized. The 'trauma process', thus, involves an intense cultural struggle over the meaning of an event, the formation of a collective identity and the construction of collective memory (Eyerman, 2004, pp. 60-62). The weight of analysis in cultural trauma studies, as I understand it, is not on the historical event as such but on the narrative struggle that constitutes and sustains that event as a cultural trauma. Thus, we have a series of interrelated terms: history, trauma, narrative and memory, that pivot around an absent presence, a traumatogenic event. It is the nature of that traumatogenic event that I wish to explore in this paper and in conclusion I will put forward a number of claims that I believe to be consistent with cultural trauma theory but challenge the predominant paradigm of trauma theory within the humanities, that is to say, the work of Shoshana Felman (1992) and Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996). That is to say, the traumatogenic event is not given but is retrospectively constructed, as cultural trauma theory argues, but from a psychoanalytic perspective the traumatogenic event is also *ahistorical* and *non-narrative*.

Psychoanalysis is both a key component of trauma theory, as developed by Caruth (1995; 1996), and a fundamental influence for the development of cultural trauma theory (see Smelser, 2004). In his introduction to the seminal volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffrey Alexander distinguishes the theoretically more reflexive notion of cultural trauma from what he calls 'lay trauma theory':

> According to lay theory, traumas are naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor's sense of well-being. In other words, the power to shatter – the "trauma" – is thought to emerge from events themselves. (2004, p. 2)

For Alexander, psychoanalytic theory, as it has been filtered through the work of Caruth, is a primary example of such lay theory. Caruth, he suggests, 'roots her analysis in the power and objectivity of the originating traumatic event' (*ibid*., p. 6) and whenever Caruth describes traumatic symptoms, she always returns to notion of objectivity, reality and truth (*ibid*., p. 7). In contrast to the underlying naturalism of this argument, Alexander and his colleagues argue:

> [E]vents do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. (*ibid*., p. 8)

My aim in this paper is to see if I can square this circle, to utilise the notion of cultural trauma, and, at the same time, to maintain a commitment to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is not a monolithic theory and there are alternative readings of Freud and Lacan which do not fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy identified by Alexander.

Trauma Theory

In two important works in the mid-1990s Caruth proposed a theory of trauma based on a particular deconstructive reading of Freud that stressed the impossibility of ever representing the traumatogenic event. The Holocaust is the paradigmatic event in this sense, an event so overwhelming in its magnitude and horror that it can never be fully or truthfully, or even adequately, represented (Friedlander, 1992). As a Lacanian, I am in agreement with Caruth's insistence on the inevitable failure of representation (Homer, 2010); my disagreement with her position is twofold. First, her reliance on certain empirical claims from the field of neurobiology and, second, on the issue of history and trauma. I will come back to these disagreements shortly, let me first briefly outline Caruth's theory of trauma.

For Caruth, drawing upon Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1984 [1920]),

> trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on. (1996, p. 4)

Depending on where one places the stress here, it is now clear to me that this statement can be read in very different ways. I have always read this from the perspective of Freud's conception of *Nachträglichkeit* or 'afterwardsness' (Laplanche, 1999), that is to say, that the traumatogenic event is retrospectively constructed. It is apparent to me today, however, that many proponents of trauma theory read this differently and place the emphasis on *the event* itself as a point of origin or foundation for the subsequent trauma. To quote Caruth once again, traumatic neurosis emerges 'as the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind' (1996, p. 2). In her edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth makes this emphasis on the actuality of the event much more explicit through her endorsement of two claims made by neuroscience. First, that traumatic symptoms are *veridical* memories or representations of a traumatic event (*ibid*., p. 5) and, second, that these same symptoms are *literal* replicas or repetitions of the trauma (*ibid*., p. 152). In other words, behind trauma lies an actual empirical event that may not be accessible to immediate memory but is ultimately retrievable through hypnosis or other forms of drug-induced therapy. Traumatic memory, for Caruth, becomes 'the literal registration of an event' (*ibid*.), or as the neurobiologists put it, the 'etching into the brain of an event' (*ibid*., p. 153). Paradoxically, for Caruth, it is the very unassimilated nature and unknowability of the event, its absence of traces, that testifies to its actuality:

> For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension.

> The flashback or traumatic re-enactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*. (*ibid*.)

Caruth admits that an account of trauma might be difficult to tell, to verbalise, but that traumatic experience must be transformed into narrative memory if it is to achieve integration for the sake of testimony and the sake of cure.

Susannah Radstone (2000; 2001; 2007) has long pointed out there are a number of consequences of Caruth's endorsement of neurobiology: one, it places its emphasis on the actuality of the traumatogenic event; two, it shifts the focus from psychic processes to the function of the brain; and, three, it posits a passive form of sovereign subjectivity that psychoanalysis explicitly undermines. While, on the one hand, Caruth insists on the *belatedness* of traumatic memory, with its resonance of Freud's conception of *Nachträglichkeit*, on the other, her assertion of *the truth of an event* suggests a progressive view of temporality and the event *as cause*. Indeed, although her monograph, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), considers trauma in relation to Freud and Lacan, her earlier introductions to the edited volume, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), frame the notion of trauma in terms of neuroscience that explicitly reject the Freudian notion of the unconscious and of repression in favour of a model of dissociation (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 1995, p. 168). Psychic conflict is replaced with an individual's response to an overwhelming external experience which must be integrated into their existing mental frames. The subject in this scenario becomes a passive sovereign subject, a victim of external circumstances, rather than the decentred subject of psychoanalysis (Radstone, 2007). As Thomas Elsaesser (2014) has put it, trauma theory is not so much a theory of recovered memory as a theory of recovered referentiality.

My second theoretical difference with Caruth's theory derives from the conflation of a theory of trauma with a theory of history. As Caruth writes, 'history is precisely the way in which we are implicated in each other's traumas' (1996, p. 24). This is clearly a gross simplification of complex material processes, but a simplification that has fed through into other literary and film theorists.[1] History, trauma and event are collapsed together, as traumatic dreams and symptoms are validated for their *literality*:

> It is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompletion in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, *absolutely* true to the event. It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms

[1] Cultural trauma theories' elaboration of the 'trauma process' with an identification of victims, perpetrators, injury, claim and the construction of the trauma narrative offers, I believe, a much richer and more mediated relation between trauma and history (see Alexander, 2004, pp. 10-30).

> the centre of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself. (Caruth, 1995a, p. 5)

It is Caruth's insistence on the literality of the event and its absolute truth in repetition that I find problematic. Furthermore, the literal registration of an event in memory facilitates a conflation of history and trauma that I believe to be spurious and I do not see as an inevitable outcome of either a Freudian or Lacanian understanding of trauma.

Dominick LaCapra suggests that in order to avoid such a fallacious conflation of history with trauma, as in Caruth's work, or history with memory, as in the work of Shoshana Felman, we need to distinguish between 'structural trauma' in a psychoanalytic sense and 'historical trauma'. The belated temporality of trauma and the elusive nature of the shattering experience related to it, writes LaCapra, renders the distinction between structural and historical trauma problematic and frequently results in their conflation, but the distinction is fundamental (2014, p. 82). Structural trauma appears in different ways in all societies and all lives. It is related, for LaCapra, to a trans-historical absence. Everyone is subject to structural trauma, as it is experienced *in* repetition and is related to *jouissance*; this is trauma in the sense that Caruth discusses. Historical trauma, on the other hand, is situationally specific and its representation depends on the careful delineation of victims, perpetrators and bystanders, in the sense that not everyone who experiences an event is traumatized and everyone who is traumatized is not necessarily a victim. In the case of historical trauma, it is at least theoretically possible to locate the traumatic events, whereas structural trauma is not the event itself but the anxiety-provoking process. Structural trauma, in short, is governed by the temporality of repetition, the compulsion to repeat, Freud's death drive; historical trauma, on the other hand, is *constructed* in the present in dialogue with the past, not made through repetition, it is a fundamentally narrative form. Contrary to LaCapra's distinction between structural and historical trauma, I will maintain that the *belated* temporality of trauma in both of its forms is *ahistorical*.

Freud and the Event

According to Ruth Leys (2000), the confusion in trauma theory around the status of the traumatogenic event can be traced back to Freud and the two distinct notions of trauma I outlined above. According to Leys, Freud's shift gave rise to two opposing paradigms of trauma, the memetic and the anti-memetic traditions. The memetic paradigm contends that:

> [T]he traumatic repetition which the victim is encouraged to dramatize in the hypnotic-cathartic treatment takes the form of an acting out of the real or fantasized scene of trauma (for in the trance state the scene in question may well contain

> fictive elements, as Freud and others were aware) – an acting out that, because it takes place in the mode of an emotional identification that constitutes the hypnotic rapport, is unavailable for subsequent recollection. (*ibid*., p. 37)

In other words, precisely because the victim cannot recall the original traumatogenic event, she/he is fated to act it out or imitate it, but the event itself remains 'unavailable' to conscious memory and recall. The anti-memetic paradigm, on the other hand, sees trauma as something that can be recollected in full consciousness and verbalized or narrativized. Trauma, in this sense, is a purely external event or shock that impacts on, and overwhelms, an always-already constituted subject and, therefore, 'there is in principle no problem of eventually remembering or otherwise the traumatic event' (*ibid*., p. 299). This anti-memetic tendency tends to lend itself to the more positivistic and (neuro)scientific understandings of trauma that Caruth and other cultural theorists now draw upon (Kaplan, 2005). Both paradigms are intrinsic to Freud's theory of trauma and the history of the concept, at least as far as Leys (2000) delineates it, furthermore, there is a constant oscillation between these two opposing paradigms and not infrequent collapse of one into the other, precipitating theoretical incoherence. My deployment of trauma in relation to film remains firmly on the memetic side of the debate; that is to say, it is based on the idea that there is no identifiable traumatogenic event that can be recollected in conscious memory, the traumatogenic event is retrospectively constituted *through* memory. Again, I believe there is a basis for this understanding of trauma in Freud's work.

Even in Freud's early theory of trauma, the trauma was not the event itself so much as the process of remembering the event. In Freud's initial theory the trauma did not focus on a singular event but involved at least two events – an initial act of seduction and the *later* event that invokes the memory and *affect* of the first scene. Crucially, 'it is only *as a memory* that the first scene becomes pathogenic by deferred action, in so far as it sparks off an influx of internal excitation' (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 467). It is not the event itself that is traumatic but the *memory* of the event, a trauma is a relation between two events. Freud's stress upon the gap, the latency period, between the traumatogenic event itself and the emergence of trauma suggests that the traumatic experience is 'irreducible to the idea of a purely physiological causal sequence' (Leys, 2000, p. 19). The concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action, foregrounds the subject's revision of past life experiences and it is this *revision* that invests the event with significance and psychic efficacy in their subsequent neuroses. For Laplanche and Pontalis, one of the crucial characteristics of Freud's conception of psychic temporality is that it is not lived experiences *in general* that undergo deferred revision but specifically experiences that were impossible the first time around to incorporate into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience (1973, p. 112). The

concepts of deferred action and the primal scene provide an entirely new theory of psychic causality, causality in reverse. The primal scene must be constructed retrospectively in order to give meaning to a subject's psychological distress. To put it another way, trauma retrospectively constructs its own cause and it was Lacan who would draw out the full implications of this.

The translation of the German term *Nachträglichkeit* as 'deferred action', as with the notion of the flashback (Caruth, 1995b, p. 152), suggests a linear conception of time that does not fully do justice to Freud's concept. When something is deferred, a causal relation between the event and its later re-emergence is imputed. Lacan's translation of Freud's term as *après-coup* (1988 [1975]), on the other hand, involves the notion of 'retroactivity'. A significant event does not simply re-emerge in the present – or worse, in Caruth's sense, re-emerge as a literal representation – but is re-signified in that 'afterwardsness', the event acquires a new psychic efficacy. The past, the trauma, only becomes what it always-already was retrospectively, as it is re-signified in the 'afterwardsness' of the present. The operation of 'afterwardsness' or retroaction, as with trauma, involves two instances, the initial scene and re-signification of that scene at a later date. Furthermore, there is always something that exceeds or escapes that re-signification, the nucleus or kernel of the trauma that cannot be represented, that is to say, the real. A traumatic event is not something that objectively takes place in the past and can be left behind but is the result of a retroactive construction in the present. Trauma, from this perspective, is 'not a singular transcendental event, which stretches into the present, but a real effect of [a] temporal relation, through which the present retroactively alters the past, which, in turn, determines the present' (Tomšič, 2015, p. 26). Trauma, therefore, involves reverse causality, a non-linear, non-progressive conception of (life) history and temporality that is not grounded in the literal recollection of an empirical, actual event.

In his paper 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' (1958 [1924]) Freud briefly recapitulates the three phases in the development of psychoanalysis, and each phase has direct implications to what I am referring to here as the traumatogenic event. In its earliest formulation, Freud's collaborative work with Breuer on hysteria (1974 [1893-1895]), the focus was on bringing back into memory, through hypnosis, the earliest moment at which a symptom was formed. What therapy aimed at was remembering and abreacting (the emotional discharge, catharsis, of affect attached to an original trauma). Such a process presupposes an external traumatic event that is retrievable in memory. When Freud abandoned hypnosis and systematized Breuer's practice of free association, the process of abreaction moved into the background, as the analyst focused on interpreting the analysand's resistances and failures to remember. The status of the original trauma, however, as an anchor for the associative train of thought retained its previous position. Finally, with the development of a fully elaborated theory of psychoanalysis:

> [T]he analyst gives up the attempt to bring a particular moment or problem into focus. He contents himself with studying whatever is present for the time being on the surface of the patient's mind, and he employs the art of interpretation mainly for the purpose of recognizing the resistances which appear there, and making them conscious to the patient. (1958 [1924], p. 147)

The analyst, in short, studies what is present, in the form of resistance, in order to interpret what is absent, the traumatogenic event. The event itself, in this final elaboration, may or may not have actually taken place.

It is conceivable in certain circumstances, observes Freud, that a special class of events are 'remembered', which were never 'forgotten', because they were never understood the first time and therefore were never conscious:

> There is one special class of experiences of the utmost importance for which no memory can as a rule be recovered. These are experiences which occurred in early childhood and were not understood at the time but which were *subsequently* understood and interpreted. (*ibid*., p. 149)

Freud has in mind here the notion of 'primal scene', as outlined in the Wolf-Man case study (1979 [1918]), but the question arises: if the analysand cannot remember an event, how does the analyst interpret its presence in absence?[2] It is here that Freud introduces the distinction between remembering and repeating. The analysand does not *remember* something that is forgotten or repressed but acts it out through *repetition*. The analysand does not reproduce trauma as a memory but as an action, an act of repetition. The analysand unconsciously repeats a trauma and only subsequently, retrospectively, interprets and gives meaning to that act of repetition. As Freud puts it, the compulsion to repeat replaces the 'impulsion to remember' and therefore we treat neurosis 'not as an event in the past' (1958 [1924], p. 151) but as a force in the present.

Freud will reiterate this understanding of trauma in one of his last works, *Moses and Monotheism* (1985 [1939]), a central text for Caruth (1996, pp. 10-24) and the broad field of trauma studies (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 42-65). In this work Freud

[2] Freud always remained ambivalent about the reality of the primal scene, in the first version of the Wolf-Man case study he asserted the reality of the scene; later on he insisted the scene was a phantasy derived from the ontogenetic or phylogenetic past of the analysand and akin to a myth. For his part the Wolf-Man, in a subsequent analysis with Ruth Mack Brunswick, claimed to have never remembered the scene, furthermore, he did not believe that it had taken place (Mack Brunswick, 1971). The significance of Freud's 'special class of experiences' such as the primal phantasy and the primal scene is that it sets certain limits on the kinds of events that can be said to be properly traumatic and avoids the problematic inflation of the concept that Ruth Leys, correctly I believe, identifies in her 'Introduction' to *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000).

draws an analogy between individual trauma and cultural or historical trauma. He first notes that trauma is the term we give to 'those impressions, experienced early and later forgotten, to which we attach such great importance in the aetiology of neuroses' (1985 [1939], p. 315). He then goes on to qualify this statement with the fact that 'it is not possible in every case to discover a manifest trauma in the neurotic subject's earliest history'. We, therefore, must accept that a trauma is not necessarily 'acquired but developed' (*ibid*.). For Freud, there are three key factors in the aetiology of trauma: it derives from early infantile experience, this experience is forgotten and, finally, it has a sexual/aggressive content:

> The interconnection of these three points is established by a theory, a product of the work of analysis which alone can bring about a knowledge of the forgotten experiences, or, to put it more vividly but also more incorrectly, bring them back to memory. (*ibid*., p. 317)

Freud's theory of trauma, as Leys points out, cannot be used to underwrite a theory of recovered memory or historical truth, as Caruth claims, precisely because it undermines such veridical claims (Leys, 2000, pp. 280-281). Freud's late theory of trauma problematizes notions of historical fact and the ontological status of the event through the concept of primal fantasy and his insistence that not all traumatogenic events can be identified and located. At the same time, in texts such as *Moses and Monotheism* and *Totem and Taboo*, Freud argues that fiction (tradition) can reveal truths that have been lost to written historiography and sometimes the inaccessible event may just be a necessary determinate for our narratives to be intelligible.

Trauma, History, Narrative, Event

Freud's elaboration of the traumatogenic event in 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' avoids, I believe, the naturalistic fallacy Alexander identifies with lay trauma theory and psychoanalysis. The traumatogenic event is not an objective event that can be recalled to memory and its truth revealed. This understanding of the traumatogenic event as a 'special class of experiences' also serves to forestall the inflation of the concept that Leys identifies in her introduction to *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) whereby any unpleasant or disturbing event can now be defined as traumatizing. Trauma, I contend, is a very special kind of event. Todd Madigan (2020) suggests that there are two distinct and not entirely compatible theories of cultural trauma employed today. What he calls the theory of *traumatic events* and the theory of *traumatized societies* (*ibid*., p. 47; emphasis in the original). While the theory of *traumatic events* 'focuses on the discursive struggle over the meaning of an event' (*ibid*.), for the theory of *traumatized societies*, on the other hand, 'the trauma drama becomes a mere scene (albeit a critical one) in the society's emergent, overarching narrative of collective identity' (*ibid*., p. 49). According to Madigan:

> The research decision that leads toward either of the two distinct theories of cultural trauma – traumatic events or traumatized societies – hinges precisely on how the analyst interprets this significant revision, re-remembering and reconstruction of collective identity. Up until this decision point, the two theories are analytically identical. (*ibid*.)

The difference between the two lies in the outcome of this analytical process, whether or not this revision and reconstruction of collective identity simply becomes a part of our collective memory or whether a fundamental reconstruction of collective identity takes place. What is important, and challenging, for my purposes here is that whichever theory of cultural trauma one deploys, narrative is fundamental to that process. In claiming that trauma is a special kind of event, I am also claiming that it is *ahistorical* and *non-narrative* and this would seem to directly contradict both of the above forms of cultural trauma theory.

I discussed above Freud's notion of the traumatogenic event as a 'special class of experiences' that cannot be remembered because they never took place but, at the same time, they have an impact upon the subject's psyche. This special class of experiences are not narrative as such because they are constructed through repetition. Traumatic experiences are fixations, the subject repetitively repeats the same experience and is unable to move on. In other words, trauma is not reducible to narrative, it is an obstacle to narrative progression, it is a blockage or stumbling block that the subject repetitively returns to and is unable to overcome and, in this sense, it is fundamentally *non-narrative*. Ruth Leys makes a similar point about the return to Pierre Janet's notion of memory in trauma theory. Whereas, for Janet, a traumatic memory repeats the past, a narrative memory narrates the past *as* past. Within trauma studies, Janet's work is frequently cited to suggest that recovery from trauma lies in transforming traumatic memories into narrative memories. According to Ruth Leys, this notion of recovery rests on a fundamental misinterpretation of Janet's conception of memory, not to mention his insistence on the importance of *forgetting*. Memory is an active process; it is the action of telling a story. Trauma, on the other hand, is a fixed idea of an event and therefore cannot be memory in Janet's understanding. There is no traumatic memory as such (Leys, 2000, p. 111). In short, memory, for Janet, is narrative, there can be no traumatic memory as trauma is a *fixed* idea. At the same time, whilst I argue that trauma is *ahistorical* and *non-narrative*, this does not imply that we cannot apprehend trauma through narrative, but that we apprehend it through the gaps, absences and aporia in narrative form.

In his influential book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) Fredric Jameson proposed that History (with a capital H) is fundamentally non-narrative and non-representable. History is not a text, argued Jameson, but remains inaccessible except through its prior (re)textualizations. History,

for Jameson, is the experience of necessity, it is not a narrative, in the sense that it re-presents the content of a story, but rather the form through which we experience necessity; the formal effects of an absent, non-representational cause (Althusser and Balibar, 1970 [1968]). History in this sense is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis (Jameson, 1981, p. 102). History is not so much a process we can apprehend as a structural limit upon consciousness and agency, a limit we constantly come up against whether we intend it or not. For Jameson, though, historical periodisation inevitably projects some form of narrative, even if History, with a capital H, is non-narrative. Narrative's particular value, as Paul Ricoeur (1983) has shown, lies in its 'intelligibility', in its ability to organise the bewildering mass of historical data into a form that is readily understandable. For Ricoeur, history takes narrative form; indeed, if history were to shed its narrative links, it would cease to be historical. The defence of an ultimately narrative character of history, however, is not to be confused with a defence of narrative history as such (Callinicos, 1995, p. 49). There is an irreducible gap introduced with the advent of the narrative between history and lived experience; between living and the recounting of events a gap – however small it may be – is opened up. As Ricoeur writes: 'life is lived, history is recounted' (1983, p. 179). Keeping open this gap between traumatogenic events, narrative and history seems to me to be essential for maintaining a reflexive theory of cultural trauma that does not fall into the naturalistic fallacy of lay trauma theory.

In his concluding remarks to 'Theories of Cultural Trauma', Todd Madigan observes that:

> It is an accident of language that the term "trauma" has come to be used to describe both an injury and the source of that injury: both the effect and its cause. And while this accident is inconsequential in ordinary usage, research in the social sciences would do well to be chary of such accidents. (2020, p. 52)

From the psychoanalytic perspective that I have outlined above, this identification of the traumatogenic event as both effect and cause is no mere accident of language but precisely the fundamental insight of Freud and Lacan into the notion of trauma. Trauma names that paradoxical class of experiences that we cannot recall because they never happened and, at the same time, we repetitively live through their effects in the present. Trauma names an event which is non-narrative but can only be known through narrative form, an absent-presence that repetitively disrupts our attempts to narrate the past in a singular and coherent way.

The Singularity of the Event

For Thomas Elsaesser, the historical basis for a cultural, as opposed to a clinical, theory of trauma lies in the disruptive experience of modernity, and the two key

figures whose writings register this dislocating shock are Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud (2014, p. 316). Freud's theory of trauma and primal fantasy, as outlined above, problematizes the status of the event and it is to the status of this modern event that I now wish to turn. Hayden White (1996) has reflected upon the (im)possibilty of representing what he defines as the modernist event in contemporary historiography. Traditional forms of historiography, essentially nineteenth-century forms of realist story-telling, are no longer appropriate for articulating the magnitude and nature of modern events.[3] For White, what he calls these 'holocaustal' events – the two world wars, the great depression and the Holocaust itself – raise issues of experience, memory and awareness of the events themselves that 'not only could not possibly have occurred before the twentieth century but the nature, scope, and implications of which no prior age could even have imagined' (*ibid*., p. 20). White goes on to compare such events to infantile traumas in the sense that 'they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered' (*ibid*.). To suggest, however, that the meaning of such events remains ambiguous for specific groups and cannot be consigned to the past does not imply that the events never happened. The issue, for White, is not the ontological status of the event itself but the epistemological problem of the *meaning* of the event for specific groups in the present. According to White:

> The distinction between facts and meanings is usually taken to be a basis of historical relativism. This is because in conventional historical inquiry, the 'facts' established about a specific 'event' are taken to *be* the meaning of that 'event'. Facts are supposed to provide the basis for arbitrating among the variety of different meanings that different groups *can* assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons. But the facts are a *function* of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have. It is the anomalous nature of modernist events – their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning them meanings – that undermines not only the status of the facts in relation to events but also the status of 'the event' in general. (*ibid*., p. 21)

According to White, the notion of the 'historical event' has undergone a radical transformation at the end of the twentieth century and what these events require is a similarly radical modernist narrative strategy in order to depict them, that is to say, the fragmented plotless narratives in which the event is 'de-realized', to use Fredric Jameson's (1984 [1961]) term.

[3] White has in mind here Benjamin's reflections on the decline of the traditional *tale* and oral traditions under the impact of modernity (Benjamin, 1968 [1936]). See also in this respect Benjamin's discussion of Kafka (1968 [1938]).

White addresses specific kinds of modernist event, 'holocaustal events', that in their sheer magnitude and horror overwhelm our ability to conceptualise and narrate them. But can this argument be extended to the event in general? As Derrida observes, it is now a commonplace of post-structuralist and deconstructive thought that the saying, or showing, of the event is never commensurate with the event itself and is never reliable *a priori* (2007, p. 447). An event worthy of the name is something that is not predictable or planned or decided upon, it is something that happens, 'the event is that which goes very quickly; there can be an event only when it's not expected, when one can no longer wait for it, when the coming of what happens interrupts the waiting' (*ibid*., p. 443). Challenging Speech Act theory, Derrida takes the examples of constative and performative utterances. A constative utterance describes what is, it conveys information that can be said to be either true or false. The performative, on the other hand, produces an event in the act of speaking it. For example, when one makes a promise, 'I do', one produces one's commitment to do that thing. In this sense, a performative utterance constitutes an event, it is a speech-event or a saying-event, in Derrida's terms (*ibid*., p. 446). Derrida's conception of the event, though, goes beyond the constative 'I know' and the performative 'I think' to address the event in its absolute singularity. For example, identifying historical events as they have taken place conveys information or knowledge about the events but tells us nothing about the singularity of the event. As Derrida observes, the loss of the absolute singularity of the event is inherent to the structure of language:

> [B]ecause as saying and hence as structure of language, it is bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and repeatability, it always misses the singularity of the event. One of the characteristics of the event is that not only does it come about as something unforeseeble, not only does it disrupt the ordinary course of history, but it is also absolutely singular. (*ibid*.)

The event, therefore, is something in its absolute singularity that is impossible to speak; speaking always comes after the event. Consequently, 'from the very outset of saying or the first appearance of the event, there is iterability and return in absolute uniqueness and utter singularity, [which] means that the arrival of the *arrivant* – or the coming of the inaugural event – can only be greeted as a return' (*ibid*., p. 452).[4] An event is an absolute surprise, something one does not see coming and cannot prepare for or predict. Furthermore, it is something that disrupts the

[4] Derrida distinguishes between the event as what comes to pass [*arrive*] and as *arrivant*; 'The absolute *arrivant* must not be merely an invited guest, someone I'm prepared to welcome, whom I have the ability to welcome. It must be someone whose unexpected, unforeseeable arrival, whose visitation... is such an irruption that I'm not prepared to receive the person' (2007, p. 451).

flow of discourse and history. In its absolute singularity, the event is governed by the temporality of repetition and can only be experienced as a return. Another term Derrida chooses for the appearance of such a unique singularity is the *symptom* (*ibid*., p. 456).

One possible definition of the event, suggests Derrida, is that the event is exceptional, it is an exception to the rules and as such 'the singularity of the exception without rules can only bring about symptoms' (*ibid*., p. 457). We should be clear here that Derrida is not talking about symptoms in a clinical sense, neither am I discussing trauma in a clinical sense. The symptom is a signifier. The symptom is a 'signification of the event over which nobody has control, that no consciousness, that no conscious subject can appropriate or control' (*ibid*.) and as such is beyond all veridical claims and discourses of knowledge. The event, in Derrida's sense, is ultimately the unsayable and it is in this sense also that I use the term trauma, or, more precisely, *traumatogenic event*.

The most sustained analysis of the status of the event as an exception, as a universal singularity, in contemporary philosophy is undoubtedly Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* (2005 [1988]). For Badiou, an event is a rare, haphazard and incalculable occurrence (1999 [1992], p. 4), it is an *interruption* of the status quo, a 'surging forth', as Badiou puts it, of precisely what cannot be counted, 'a subtraction of the One to the benefit of the multiple' (*ibid*., p. 5).[5] An event is that which punctuates a situation. Consequently, an event is always of a situation but is never reducible or equivalent to a situation. An event introduces novelty, or the new, into a situation and, as such, reconfigures the situation itself. The situation is retrospectively reconfigured and can never be the same again. As Peter Hallward writes, 'Badiou admits that we can only ever experience or *know* what is presented to us as consistent or unified, but it can sometimes happen, in the wake of an ephemeral and exceptional event, that we have an opportunity to *think*, and hold true to, the

[5] The two fundamental propositions or axioms of *Being and Event* are (1) ontology is mathematics and (2) the new happens in being under the name of the event. For Badiou, being is pure multiple, or what he also refers to as the inconsistent multiple, and cannot be presented as such, 'the multiple is the regime of presentation; the one, in respect to presentation, is an operational result; being is what presents (itself). On this basis, being is neither one (because only presentation itself is pertinent to the count-as-one), nor multiple (because the multiple is *solely* the regime of presentation)' (Badiou, 2005 [1988], p. 24). This presentation of multiplicity, through the operation of the count-as-one, is what Badiou defines as a *situation*. A situation is what confers consistency on the inconsistency of the multiple and, as there cannot be *a* presentation of being, as being is present in all presentations, the only remaining solution, according to Badiou, is that the ontological situation is *the presentation of presentation*. Thus, the wager of *Being and Event* is nothing less than 'ontology is a situation' (*ibid*., p. 27). Being as such is what is subtracted from the count-as-one and the event is that which ruptures or exceeds the situation.

inconsistency of what there is' (2008, pp. 99-100; emphasis in the original). In the sense that I am discussing it here, the 'event' is a possibility or an opening that retrospectively becomes an event through a subject's fidelity to the truth of that opening. Furthermore, and perhaps paradoxically, it is through the act of fidelity to the truth of an event that a subject comes to be.

For Badiou, the event is inextricably tied up with the notion of Truth as universal singularity. Indeed, for Slavoj Žižek (1999) the two concepts are so closely linked that he conflates them in a single notion of the 'Truth-Event'.[6] It is this insistence on Truth that is perhaps his most scandalous claim in our era of postmodernity and ethics of Otherness. In his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* Badiou identifies the four maxims of a truth procedure: i) the subject does not pre-exist the event it declares, ii) truth is entirely subjective, iii) fidelity to the declaration of an event is crucial, for truth is a process and not an illumination, iv) a truth is of itself indifferent to the state of a situation (2003 [1997], pp. 14-15). A truth procedure breaks with the principles governing a situation and instigates a new series, a new way of understanding the situation. A truth erupts within a situation as a singularity that radically transforms our perception of the situation and, therefore, is immediately universalizable, insofar as there is a subject to declare fidelity to that truth and to name the event. Event, subject, truth are thus three components of a single process of affirmation, 'a truth comes into being through those subjects who maintain a resilient fidelity to the consequences of an event that took place *in* a situation but was not *of* it' (2001 [1998], p. x). In a psychoanalytic register, another way to *think* about such events is the process of trauma. A trauma arises *in* a specific situation but is not *of* it. A trauma exists insofar as it is named, declared, by a subject, and what we might call the truth of the trauma is located in its symptoms.

What I am suggesting is that the cultural trauma associated with that event is retroactively constructed and that the assimilation of this trauma comes at the price not of the literal registration of the event itself in memory, but of the *construction* of the event in memory. Trauma disrupts time and narrative; it is governed by a logic of repetition and is therefore *atemporal*. Unlike history, which is a fundamentally narrative form, trauma is a fixation in time and therefore is an obstacle to narrative development. Once the trauma can be narrativized it is no longer, strictly speaking, traumatic.

[6] Truth and event remain distinct but related concepts; an event, as I understand it, is a moment of opening, through which the new can emerge, while truth is what Badiou calls a generic procedure, which retrospectively names an event. Badiou identifies four truth procedures: love, art, science and politics.

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