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Representing Trauma in the Arts: the Curious Case of “Quo Vadis, Aida?”

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Summary

Applying Jurgen Habermas’ distinction between the three knowledge interests guiding scientific research, this article identifies three approaches to ‘trauma’, a clinical approach, rooted in a medical model, a literary approach, rooted in psychoanalysis, and a cultural sociological approach. After elaborating on each of these perspectives, and the various forms through which trauma is represented aesthetically, the three are applied in an analysis of the film “Quo Vadis, Aida?”. It is argued that although they entail different notions of trauma, the three are not mutually exclusive and can be combined in a rich understanding of aesthetic representation.

Keywords: Cultural Trauma, Clinical, Medical, Literary, Jasmila Zbanic

It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are.

Hannah Arendt, “Isak Dinesen: 1885–1963”
in *Men in Dark Times*

The arts are a chief means of communication with the dead. Without communication with the dead a fully human life is not possible.

W.H. Auden

Introduction

In this article I identify three ways of interpreting trauma that currently dominate the field of trauma studies, and then discuss the role of the arts in its representation, finally leading to an analysis of the film “Quo Vadis, Aida?” (2020). My aim

is three-fold: to elaborate various meanings of trauma, to discuss the role of the arts in its representation, and then reflect upon the similarities and differences with that film serving as an illustrative example. I chose this particular film because the events it depicts are close at hand and because it offers an exceptionally rich example of the various conceptualizations of trauma. "Quo Vadis, Aida?" is an aesthetic representation of a contested mass killing, an individual and collective trauma that occurred during the civil wars following the fall of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The Bosnian writer/director, Jasmila Zbanic, describes her film as an attempt to document an incident, but not a documentary, that is, a fictionalized portrayal of a real incident (see Jelaca, 2021). The film is a work of imagination that makes factual reference to a claimed act of mass murder. This raises questions of accountability and accuracy, stemming from a sense of loyalty to the dead and truthfulness to the living. A number of questions regarding film and other forms of artistic representation will be addressed, such as, how can individual and collective suffering be expressed through film, and at what expense? How can film communicate "forgotten or repressed traumatic inscriptions" (Elm *et al.*, 2014).¹ What is the aim of this filmic reconstruction and how does one evaluate the results from the various perspectives on trauma?

What is Trauma?

Following Habermas (1971), I distinguish three knowledge-based approaches to trauma:

1) A clinical approach based on a medical model which emphasizes neurological and emotional affect, as captured in the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Here 'trauma' is conceptualized as a mental health issue, a perspective first developed in the field of psychology and causally based therapeutic practices, including forms of psychoanalysis. More recently, as imaging technology has advanced, neurological studies of brain tissue have been added to this clinical repertoire. In this perspective, trauma originates in a forceful incident that ruptures the ontologi-

¹ A list of questions formulated by Elm *et al.* (2014, p. 8) are useful to consider: "How can individual and/or collective wounds be transferred to and popularized by film? How does film communicate forgotten or repressed traumatic inscriptions, be it on a national or international level? How does film affect or catalyze the 'digestion' and 'incorporation' of trauma histories in the official narration of history and national identities built on the conceptualization (and illusion) of a 'continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the *Volk*'? How do the acoustic, aesthetic, dramaturgical and narrative means of film operate together in signifying the phenomenon 'trauma'? Does the aestheticized presentation of 'trauma' in film undermine or contradict its historical content and references to real catastrophes?"

cal security of an individual, causing a reaction that continually affects a person's being in the world in disruptive ways. As van der Kolk puts it, "trauma is really a wound that happens to your psyche, to your mind, to your brain. Suddenly you're confronted with something that you are faced with horror and helplessness. That nothing prepares you for this... so something switches off at that point in your mind and your brain. And the nature of trauma is that you get stuck there. So instead of remembering something unpleasant, you keep reliving something very unpleasant" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-bessel-van-der-kolk.html>). A traumatic blow or event is defined by its intensity, "by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1974, p. 465). In essence, in the medical model trauma is conceptualized as an emotionally charged reaction to some overwhelming external incident that marks an individual forever, inducing compulsive destructive behavior whose sources must be uncovered to be treated. While offering a comprehensive framework for treating a 'traumatized' individual, the model limits itself by a distinctive lack of concern with the social and political contexts in which such trauma might occur.

2) Literary studies: building out from psychoanalytic modifications to the medical model, a literary approach to traumatic experience developed in the 1990s with a distinctive practical intent: interpreting aesthetic representations through the lens of 'trauma' and 'trauma' through the lens of art.² The aim was to understand how trauma, in its clinical meaning, is expressed through aesthetic means, whose forms and formats provide means of "expressing the inexpressible" (Caruth, 1996), or, in an alternative version, how our deepest pain is represented in literature (Pederson, 2014).³

As in the medical model, the source of the pain and suffering stems from an incident so powerful that it fractures memory and thus is not directly available for recall. Rather, it must be reconstructed obliquely. "Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception" (Tal, 1996, p. 15). Here aesthetic representation, literature in particular, are pointed to as forms through which

² See, for example, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 2020.

³ Pederson (2014) presents an alternative to what he identifies as the Caruth model of literary understanding of trauma. Following Richard McNally, he argues that "traumatic amnesia is a myth", that "victims may choose not to speak but that there is little evidence that they cannot". From his perspective trauma is both memorable and describable.

the root incident can be recovered. 'Trauma' is thus articulated through interpretative acts in means provided by aesthetic representation, literary, oral, visual, and kinetic. The aim of theorizing is to provide a narrative-based heuristic frame to analyze these representations of trauma. There is also a practical interest in cathartic healing, for those expressing their trauma and for those witnessing it.

Since the 1990s, many aesthetic works consciously seeking to represent and interpret traumatic experience have appeared. The original point of reference was the Holocaust, but attention soon broadened to include the Vietnam War, incest, and sexual assault (van der Kolk, 2015). There was also attention paid to collective forces, such as racism and colonialism, as they propounded emotional costs on individuals.

So conceived, acts of representation can be interpreted as instructive and therapeutic for creators as well as audiences. In literary forms such as novels, the dilemmas expressed in trauma-rooted narratives can confront a reader with their own fears, thus offering a space of personal reflection as well as empathy, by placing a reader in mediated relation to another's trauma, as direct access is impossible. The "trauma novel", as understood by Balaev (2008, p. 150), "conveys profound loss or intense fear... illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that informs new perceptions of self and world".⁴ At the same time, aesthetic representations of trauma problematize an audience's relationship to the traumatized, as the victims' painful experiences invite empathetic understanding. The practical, therapeutic aim of aesthetic trauma representation therefore is not limited to the creator or, say, to the characters in the novel in creating a path to understanding. The aim of trauma representation includes prompting others to reflect on the meaning of trauma, while at the same time creating a sympathetic image of human suffering. In this literary mode, such narratives aim at extending an audience's awareness of trauma by confronting them with personalized, experientially oriented stories.

Though they share an individual orientation and a realist understanding of 'trauma', a fundamental difference between the clinical approach and its literary adaptation is the inclusion of an audience, those who vicariously experience

⁴ "Therefore, trauma novels' authors employ a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences to emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience. The narrative strategy of silence may create a gap in time or feeling that allows the reader to imagine what might or could have happened to the protagonist, thereby broadening the meaning and effects of the experience. These strategies help the author structure the narrative into a form that attempts to embody the psychological action of traumatic memory or dissociation" (Muhammad and Al-Banna, 2015, p. 6).

the trauma of others.⁵ Michaels suggests aesthetic representations of trauma affects audiences because, “[i]t is only when the events of the past can be imagined not only to have consequences for the present but to live on in the present that they can become part of our experience and can testify to who we are”. Readers, in other words, may learn about themselves through imagining the suffering of others, the knowledge of which can have preventive as well as empathetic affect.

Psychoanalytic approaches have always stressed the repetitive character of traumatic experience; literary appropriations reveal how past experience influences present behavior, leading to social learning. While they have psychoanalysis in common, they are quite different in their aims; living through trauma (and writing about it) is different from learning from another’s traumatic experience. As aesthetic representations, such trauma narratives immerse readers in a process of remembrance, as they re-present suffering through recognizable experience, whose content is gleaned through association more than a structured story. A powerful example can be found in Nona Fernandez’s (2016, pp. 176-177) fictionalized recounting of memorialization of those who ‘disappeared’ during the Chilean dictatorship that builds on her own experience and names real individuals and places:

But I don’t know any more whose funeral I’m remembering. It might be the Vergara brothers from Villa Francia, or the boy burned to death by a military patrol, or the priest shot in the settlement of La Victoria, or the boy riddled with bullets on Calle Bulnes, or the kidnapped reporter, or the group assassinated on the Feast of Corpus Christi, or one of the others, any of the others. Time isn’t straightforward, it mixes everything up, shuffles the dead, merges them, separates them out again, advances backward, retreats in reverse, spins like a merry-go-round, like a tiny wheel in a laboratory cage, and traps us in funerals and marches and detentions, leaving us with no assurance of continuity or escape.

Like the editorial hand in film documentation, the fictionalized narrator structures the fragments into a coherent whole. As Felman and Laub put it, “the reader is guided through the narrative via the disorientations and conflicts of traumatic memory. For traumatic memory to lose its power as a fragment and symptom and for it to be integrated into memory a form of narrative reconstruction or re-externalization has to occur” (1992, p. 69).

⁵ There are some examples of those using this clinical approach that speak of collective trauma and the traumatization of groups; see, for example, Gilad Hirschberger (2018) ‘Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 9.

To summarize, from the literary/aesthetic perspective, trauma narratives are structuring devices that help the reader access traumatic experience, real and imaginary. They articulate inner processes to an audience of witnesses, as characters in narrated texts, turning readers into participant/observers with the aim of engaging them in a reflective, cathartic process. As such, aesthetic representations raise ethical questions about responsibility, as they place viewers in the position of witness. Unlike the therapist in the psychoanalytic dialogue whose aim is to repair the victim, the audience to aesthetically represented trauma is left to ponder what they meant to do with this knowledge of another's pain. How are they to act accordingly? In addition, they must reflect upon the veracity of what they have witnessed, asking themselves, did this happen as represented? The veracity of the reconstructed incident, the primal scene of the trauma, is of less concern for the therapist, where it is sufficient that the victim believes it to be the case. The audience to aesthetically represented trauma must reflect on the authenticity of what is depicted. Is this account true, did it really happen this way or is there artistic license taken, drama added for affect? Moreover, if so, could the story be told in another way, by another author? In aesthetic representations, it is not only the audience that is positioned, but also the creator.

3) Cultural trauma: offers a social conception of trauma that builds on theories of collective trauma and collective memory. It represents a shift of focus from individuals to collectives, as well as a move away from the search for a distinctive causal incident and pathological outcomes. As opposed to physical trauma, which entails a bodily wound, or psychological trauma, which involves a psychic wound, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion (Eyerman, 2019). This sociological concept of cultural trauma differs from a psychological notion of trauma as it describes a *collective interpretive process* rather than an *individual's psycho-emotional state*.

'Trauma' is conceptualized as part of a conflictual discursive process, the cultural trauma process (CTP), where individual suffering is given collective meaning through competing accounts of what happened and who was responsible after triggering incidents of individual suffering. As Alexander and Breese (2011, p. xiii) put it, "transforming individual suffering requires cultural work, speeches, marches, meetings, plays, movies, and storytelling of all kinds". From this perspective, 'trauma' is constructed through narratives that weave individual experience into collective stories aimed at articulating and then repairing a fractured collective identity. Trauma narratives are those accounts that arise to tell the story of what happened to 'us', who is responsible for that, and what should now be done

to reform 'our' collectivity. This often takes form in a framework circumscribed by a polarity of victims and perpetrators, 'we' have suffered, and 'they' are the cause.⁶

As there is no psycho-biological pathology or hidden causal incident to uncover, the theory of cultural trauma does not deal with the same level of practical interests as the clinical and literary approaches. Its primary focus is scholarly and academic, taking form in case studies and historical comparisons of the cultural trauma process. There is, however, an underlying aim in increasing human understanding; for example, highlighting the role that historical memory plays in social life, and in explaining the wider social and political conditions that may reinforce and sustain social pathology at the group and individual levels. In this sense, it offers a corrective to the clinical approach. If one assumes that historical knowledge is essential in preventing repetition of past mistakes, then the cultural trauma perspective can make important contributions toward this end. CTP has two primary means of resolution: reconciliation or breach, which can mean either the repair or the dissolution of collective identity, further, the formation of new collectivities. Without one of those resolutions, fractured collectivities can remain in states of unresolved tension; however, even in the case of the formation of new collectivities, the memory of the breach (why this happened and what it meant) will have to be dealt with. One model for achieving reconciliation and reconstituting a fractured collective identity is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Cultural trauma can serve as the theoretical lens through which the need for such commissions is acknowledged, and even more fundamentally, for the necessity of a multi-faceted approach to historical research.⁷

Trauma and Aesthetic Representation

What can aesthetic representation, art, tell us about trauma? One answer is suggested by the poet Auden in the citation above, art communicates between the living and the dead, the past and the present, by giving voice to those who have lost it. Aesthetic representation can re-present those (individuals and events) passed and, through them, speak directly to those present. Art can thus salvage experience and redeem life. This redeeming quality lays great responsibility on the artist, the storyteller representing those past to those present. Life-like stories must be represented in a believable, authentic manner; they must at least 'ring true' for the audience, even as they are dramatized through fictive performance. Redeeming lost experience posi-

⁶ On the category 'victim', see Peraica (2008).

⁷ In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina all parties are against such an approach.

tions the artist in the powerful role of interpreter, making claim to ‘what really happened’, representing not only lost experience, but also the manner in which it was lost. The literary theory of trauma broadens this redeeming quality to include the experience of the audience to the events represented. Through its various forms, literary, oral, kinetic, and visual, aesthetic representations that seek to capture and transmit traumatic experience place the creator/producer in a position of great responsibility, not only to the dead, but also the living. What are the intended or possible unintended responses an artwork will provoke? Provoking emotional response has always been central to the arts, but are there special critical considerations in the representation of another’s trauma? Are there moral as well as political considerations to be taken into account by the creator/producer? We will return to such questions in our analysis of “Quo Vadis, Aida?”.

As a communicative act, aesthetic representation can articulate and convey the meaning of trauma through imagining traumatic experience and objectifying it. This does not necessarily uncover the ‘secret’ of trauma (Bennett, 2005, p. 7). Aesthetic representations are always open to interpretation and to conflicts over the meaning of what is depicted. Any attempt to represent an emotionally charged event or experience is always done from some point of view and for a particular purpose. Works of art are created by situated persons and invite audiences to interpret what is depicted in a particular way, what the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980) calls the ‘preferred reading’ encoded in works of art.⁸ Seldom acknowledged by their creators, these encoded messages can be pointed out by others, audiences, critics, and social theorists. The critical audience, Walter Benjamin once pointed out, completes the work of art. This requires that an audience take an active, critical reflective perspective to be engaged as co-producer, rather than a mere spectator. For some in the audience, the representation of trauma can be grounds for self-reflection on their own experience, while for others it can evoke vicarious experience of someone’s suffering.

In aesthetic representations, one can fruitfully distinguish fictional attempts to represent trauma from ‘traumatized’ representations, i.e., those based upon witness testimony, accounts of real experience by those who lived them. The latter, representing as well as constituting traumatic memory, are meant to document, to provide evidence for the public record. Both fictional and witness-based accounts are attempts to narrate what had previously been unspeakable.⁹ In this sense, both can

⁸ The ‘preferred’ reading is one of several possible readings Hall identifies. The others are negotiated and oppositional.

⁹ This is the case, for example, of “Shoah” (1985), Claude Lanzmann’s nine-hour film where Holocaust survivors and their executioners recount their experience. As we will show, “Quo

have therapeutic value, an attempt to relieve pain through objectification, providing the possibility of catharsis for victim and audience. From the realist perspective of the medical model, those suffering traumatic experience may be helped through representing, working through, their experience through artistic means, with various forms of art therapy being an example. For those with access, writing a factual or fiction account, or making a film or musical composition rooted in personal experience or an historical event can provide the same opportunity. Re-presenting an experience can have therapeutic value as part of a healing process. According to van der Kolk (2015), one of those theoretically oriented clinicians who greatly influenced the literary approach to trauma and its healing, trauma is defined by its intensity as an emotional reaction to an event. This would make the arts particularly useful in the articulation of trauma for those suffering that reaction as well as helping others understand those emotions.

In both cases, a demand for authenticity is engendered, a pact and a pledge circumscribing a sense of loyalty to the dead. Loyalty means a sense of responsibility; a filmmaker, for example, has a responsibility to document as authentically as possible the cause of their pain, and to contextualize it as correctly as possible. The viewers have the responsibility to read the film closely and carefully, to reflect on its meaning, this includes assuming some critical distance, not being entirely drawn in and trusting what is depicted without reflection. If what is depicted happened, someone is responsible, and it is up to creators and viewers to negotiate this claim. Viewing a film about traumatic experience, like “*Quo Vadis, Aida?*”, pushes the viewer to look further, to inquire into the claims and come to their own conclusions. The film’s reconstruction is thus understood as an opening rather than a definitive closing.

Through aesthetic representation, one can fruitfully distinguish fictional attempts to represent trauma from ‘traumatized’ representations, i.e., those based upon witness testimony, accounts of real experience by those who lived them. The latter are meant to document, to provide evidence for the public record. Both can be considered as attempts to narrate what had previously been unspeakable, however. In this sense, they can be considered to have therapeutic value, a chance to ‘work through’ pain by giving voice to those who suffered. From the realist perspective of the medical model, those suffering traumatic experience may be helped through

Vadis, Aida?” is an example of the former. Both are encoded with preferred readings. Lanzmann’s documentary presents testimony by victim and perpetrator in a cumulative process that overwhelms the viewer. Their voices and stories were edited for effect and placed within the present. The aim, Lanzmann said, was to represent what could not be seen, the death of millions in a genocidal process (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/claude-lanzmann-changed-the-history-of-filmmaking-with-shoah>).

representing their experience through artistic means, which may also have therapeutic value for viewing audiences.

From the constructivist perspective of CTP, artistic representations of trauma are forms of argumentation as well as interpretation, part of the meaning struggle to determine what happened and who was responsible. Fictional as well as factual accounts are equal from this perspective, even where one (such as a documentary film) makes open truth claims, and the other (an industry-produced commercial film proclaiming to be "based on real events") does not. While the clinical and literary approaches focus on the articulation and working through of personal 'trauma', cultural trauma turns attention to the wider public discourse and the political and social context the film was meant to influence. Here, 'trauma' is a socially constructed attribution, an emotionally loaded interpretive framework for describing the suffering caused by the conflict that led to the events represented. The focus is on the shattering of collective identities and the aftermath, the process of repair or dissolution. The CTP circumscribes and traces this meaning-making process, the "trauma drama", through its various forms and formats, including the role of the arts in shaping collective identity formation and memorialization. The process reconstructs the emergent and competing trauma narratives and identifies their articulators as carriers of collective memory.

Central to the CTP are narratives that link present conditions to a selected historical past. The veracity of such claims about the past are subordinate to the interests of the present, and the accounts of 'what happened' will vary accordingly. According to Alexander (2004), such trauma narratives are always performative, that is, interpretive and concerned with audience reception. As opposed to the real, frightening, and disjointed events themselves, such "performance provides actors and audience members with the space, time, and safety to ponder alternatives... without exploring them in reality and suffering consequences" (Carr, 2020, p. 37). The shift to a performative reading of any aesthetic representation, rather than judging veracity alone, is essential. Performativity, here, means that the trauma will receive its meaning only in retrospect, by the kinds of memories it will engender and their interpretation. In other words, performativity implicates the viewer in the production of the meaning of the work.¹⁰

¹⁰ However, if trauma belongs to the category of the performative, it is nonetheless a special case. Trauma has nothing to perform, and so it performs this nothingness. As Elsaesser explains, "One would have to invent the category of the 'negative performative', because trauma affects the texture of experience by the apparent absence of traces" (Elsaesser, 2001).

“Quo Vadis, Aida?” Through the Lens of the Three Approaches to Trauma

In the following, we discuss the film from the three perspectives on trauma we have identified. “Quo Vadis, Ada?” is a commercial film that dramatizes what is understood as a real event, an incident of systematic murder of Bosnian civilians during the ethnic conflicts as the former Yugoslavian state and society collapsed. The claim of genocide, though confirmed by the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY), is denied by some Serbian authorities and many politicians in the Republic of Srpska. In that sense, the film is an intervention into an ongoing debate.¹¹

Here is a summary of the film: In July 1995, Aida, a local teacher-turned-interpreter working at a Dutch-led UN base near the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia, is put in an impossible situation. As the Serbian army takes over the region, a militia under General Ratko Mladic surrounds the “safe zone” of Srebrenica, thousands of displaced and frightened Bosnians arrive at the base in search of shelter, including Aida’s family. Struggling against broken promises, bureaucracy, and outright lies, the Dutch soldiers are unable to house and protect them. Aida does all she can to save her family, but all in vain. In the closing sequence, Aida returns to her old neighborhood in postwar Srebrenica, where children of the former enemies play together. Is this civic repair or the beginning of a new struggle?

Each of the aesthetic modes has its distinctive characteristics, its advantages and disadvantages with regard to trauma representation. Caruth (1996) and other proponents of the literary perspective claim literature as especially well placed to represent trauma because of its capacity to give voice to hidden and fragmented memory and because reading is most often a solitary, private activity that can encourage empathetic self-reflection. Of all the forms of aesthetic representation, film production and distribution are among the most technically complex and costly. Producing a film takes time and engages many. Films also meet their audiences in particular circumstances, most usually in darkened, acoustically enhanced public spaces, where comfort food is consumed in the company of strangers. Because of the time and expense involved, films are necessarily among the last of the aesthetic forms in responding to the question of ‘what happened here’, with regard to an explosive incident. After onsite social media accounts which can be almost in-

¹¹ The issue of terminology is crucial and contested. “For example, in the verdict against Karadžić, the massacre in Srebrenica is defined as extermination [in ordinary language mass murder], which together with deportation of women and children becomes genocide. The remarkable point is that extermination, according to the Tribunal’s own terminology, is a crime against humanity, i.e. does not fulfill the criteria for genocide” (Magnusson, 2021, p. 2). Though brutally treated, the Bosnian people “were not threatened with extinction”.

stantaneous, live radio and televised news broadcasting are amongst the quickest to give a narrative accounting in transforming a confusing incident into an event. The arts follow, with visual accounts like photography and video recordings leading the way.

Literary accounts of traumatic experience can be presented as straightforward narratives, telling a story that has a beginning and an end, they can also attempt to represent the fragmented nature of such experience in form as well as content. An example is the novel *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron (1979) which is written in traditional narrative form, yet slowly reveals some hidden dimensions as the plot moves forward. Some more recent novels like *Twilight Zone* (2016) and *Milkman* (2018) are more experimental in their form.¹² Writers use various techniques to capture 'trauma', for example, inner dialogues that recount backstory wounds, that are intended to provide readers with a deeper understanding of a character's behavior.

¹² Nona Fernandez's novel *The Twilight Zone* (2016) mixes biographical fact in a fictional account of real events, the public confession of a military torturer during the political events in Chile in the 1970s. It offers an interesting comparison to Zbanic's film. Zbanic and Fernandez were both around the same age when the events they recount occurred, theirs is an act of reconstructed memory. Both are fictionalized yet build on facts gathered through years of research. As a literary form, *The Twilight Zone* is experimental, the narration moves back and forth in time, as well as between factual accounting and experimenting with literary form. Zbanic's film is conventional in its storytelling. Both feel the duty to recount a truth to their respective audience. Like filmed documentaries, especially those concerning traumatic events, experimental novels are not meant for mass audiences. The small audience usually comes prepared with an interest in the topic. Fernandez describes a viewing of a documentary about some of the horrific events in Chile, a film that she had a hand in making, that she viewed with her mother some 30 years after. In this 'multiplex' cinema, made for 3D blockbusters, they were the only ones present. "I'm not the protagonist of what I see. I wasn't there, I have no dialogue or part in the plot. The scenes projected in this theater are not mine, but they have always been close, at my heels. Maybe that's why I think of them as part of my story. I was born with them planted inside me, images in a family album that I didn't choose or arrange. [The scenes are] always there, unshakeable. They come back to me and I come back to them, in a dense, circular time, the kind I am breathing in this empty theater" (p. 56).

Another example of a trauma novel is Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018). The story begins with the narrator recounting being physically threatened as an adult and sexually abused as a young girl, then moves to tracing her daily life as a teenager in Belfast during the Troubles in the 1970s. This is fiction drawing on biography. Like Zbanic and Fernandez, Burns is part of a 1.5 generation that lived through traumatic times as young adults. Like Fernandez and unlike Zbanic, Burns chooses difficult aesthetic means to document this difficult experience. Her narrative is not straightforward but crisscrosses in time. Her characters do not have proper names and the city of Belfast, where in fact she grew up and is the obvious point of geographical reference, is never named. The title is the name of her threatening perpetrator and the focal point of her trauma, and the narrator is called 'middle sister', something that forces the reader to stop and reflect often.

Filmic representations make use of lighting and sound, flashbacks, split and filtered screens to enhance with similar purpose. The use of facial close-ups to capture inner emotion is a common technique. As Elm *et al.* (2014, p. 10) put it, “In combination with music, facial expressions alter non-readable traces of ‘trauma’ into cultural encodings that might be more easily interpretable and digestible. Thus, film functions as a medium that witnesses, remembers and is haunted and obsessed by traumatic historical events that can neither be seen in clear light nor be fully decoded. While film does not provide an absolute decoding of the traumatic experience, this medium comes, in a way, close to this goal, if only as a depiction of that which defies representation.” This is a clear reference to ‘trauma’ as understood by Caruth and others in the literary perspective.

From the same perspective, E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (2004, pp. 9-10) distinguish four positions for viewers of what they call trauma films: (1) the position of being introduced to trauma through a film’s themes and techniques; (2) the position of being vicariously traumatized; (3) the position of being a voyeur; (4) the position of being a witness.¹³ This latter is relevant to our analysis. They write, “witnessing opens a space for the transformation of the viewer”; something that is particularly the case in what they call ‘regional films’, those concerning specific geographic publics. Here, films about painful historical incidents, ‘local genocides’, can become “facilitating agents for the mobilization of ‘non-conventional resources’ such as social awareness, solidarity, dedication, commitment”, to serve a historical sense of duty. This is a clear move beyond the ‘text’ that was the focus of much of post-modern literary analysis. With its reference to real historical events, “Quo Vadis, Aida?” raises questions about the relation between real events and their filmic reconstruction, not only from the perspective of the creator but also the viewing audience. Especially after being nominated for an Oscar, the audience expanded to become multi-layered. In considering its impact, one would have to consider what its viewing could mean for those with personal knowledge and interest and those more distant. All layers of the audience however can be considered potential witnesses, in the critical audience sense of the term.

¹³ Brand (2009, p. 11) calls witnessing “the paradigmatic mode of relating to trauma”. He writes, “To witness is to stand in proximity to an event that escapes representation but calls for communication nevertheless. Thus, witnessing is situated in the gap that exists between event and representation”. However, if, as Brand suggests, the film viewing should be described as a performance, then, “the viewer operates within the ‘trauma process’, struggling to bridge the gap between event and representation. The viewer is placed in the position of a witness – midway between a mood and its articulation, a loss and its narration. It is this position that forces the viewer to struggle for comprehension. In this respect, the failure to reach a conclusion only serves to maintain the act of witnessing”.

Like the translator, the main character in "Quo Vadis, Aida?", the film gives dramatic testimony to an experience that was not available to any audience (with the exception of the real translators caught in this situation), local, regional and international. It mediates and articulates the trauma of others.¹⁴ Given the creator's stated intentions, there is a claim to authenticity if not truth in this representation of trauma. Things could have happened this way. However, since for most of the prospective audience this is a crucial viewing, as the film may be their only source of information about the events described, there is an extra burden, a special responsibility on the creator to make clear their own views and to be as factual as possible.

There is both individual as well as collective trauma represented here, as understood in each of the three perspectives. The main character is forced to make fateful decisions about the fate of her own family along with those that impact more anonymous others. Through the specific characteristics of film technique, acoustic, dramaturgical, and narrative means interweave to signify trauma that is both individual and collective at the same time. Dramatic representations of death, betrayal, frustration, anger, and fear are called upon through various filmic techniques, while at the same time forming grounds for emotionally charged reaction in the audience, one that could evoke empathetic understanding, as well the lesser reactions distinguished above. Raised as well is the issue of how this aesthetic representation of trauma and the preferred reading encoded by the creator relates itself to the real catastrophe of this painful civil war and how this version may influence the collective memory of the nation.

The first issue, however, is asking 'whose trauma'?

Whose Trauma?

Whatever the means and techniques applied, representations of trauma are reconstructed retrospectively; this is the case in all three of the highlighted approaches. Defined as fractured and fracturing and 'beyond experience' in the clinical and literary perspectives, a traumatizing incident can only be reconstructed after its actual occurrence. The historical approach of cultural trauma is also necessarily after the fact.¹⁵ This raises issues of not only selectivity but also intentionality. Since the

¹⁴ On the relation of giving testimony and witnessing, see Arendt (1963). On the experience of the real translators, see <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/10/srebrenicas-young-translators-how-our-jobs-saved-our-lives/>.

¹⁵ One can consider "Quo Vadis, Aida?" an 'aftermath' film from each of the perspectives. Carr (2020, p. 11) defines such films in the following way, "aftermath films represent the diffuse efforts to gauge the palpable impact of disruptive events on civilian life and national identity... [such films] explore the legacy of that conflict or that oppressive regime or any event that changed life for the society as a group".

depicted events take place in a contested past, one can begin with a question to the creator, why make this film now and what does it intend?¹⁶ In several interviews, Bosnian filmmaker and Sarajevo native Jasmila Zbanic, who wrote and directed the film and who was 20 years old when the depicted incident took place, noted that she had been haunted by stories of what had occurred from those with whom she shared a collective identification. While this was not her first work to cover war-related trauma, she had to ‘work on herself’, she noted, to represent these personally moving emotional accounts in a way that would be presentable to a general audience. After beginning the necessary research, which included meeting families of the victims, in her own accounting she was so overwhelmed with anger that making the film meant dealing with her own emotions. While others may dispute these events, they were real for her and the fact that others might not agree only added to her anger (<https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/52475/1/quo-vadis-aida-bosnia-srebrenica-massacre-jasmila-zbanic-oscars-interview>). This raises the issue of how a creator’s own emotional engagement may influence selectivity in storytelling and the concern with loyalty to the dead.

From both the clinical and literary theory perspectives one can ask how this personal engagement affected her professional work; can making the film be considered a working through of her own trauma as well as that of a collective with whom she identified? What does working through mean here, when one is not present but strongly identifies and attempts to reconstruct a traumatizing event, true to those who were?

Zbanic consciously engaged ‘actors’ who, like herself, were themselves personally affected by the events her film represented; is this then a ‘trauma film’ for the filmmaker as well as the projected audience? If so, how does it affect both the experience of making and viewing, how does this affect veracity and what are the healing possibilities for all those involved? How will local and international audiences react, will the film ‘trigger’ trauma or catharsis, how will it affect the larger understanding and incorporation of the war and its aftermath?

In the Freudian tradition that underpins much of the clinical and literary perspective on trauma, the notion of ‘working through’ is central to the healing process. What might that mean with regard to this film? From this perspective, the incident that triggered trauma remains present in the mind and body of the traumatized individual, while the clinician is actively present in the process of articulation, working

¹⁶ A generational approach to trauma representation recommends waiting several generations for the emotions and conflicting interests to dissipate (Igartua and Paez, 1997). In Zbanic’s case, it took a generation to make “Quo Vadis, Aida?”, however the main characters are still alive, and many deny the accusation of genocide. The issue of how to represent the main killers, choice of actor and how to play it, were crucial in making the film.

through refers to the labor of the patient in overcoming resistance to her/his hidden memory and bring it to light. Film seems as good an instrument as literature in this endeavor, for the actors and the audience with some level of identification in what is depicted.

Zbanic's stated intention was to document but not make a documentary; in other words, to dramatize and aestheticize what she and others engaged in the project conceive as real events. To enhance authenticity, to be as accurate as possible, the director made use of non-professionals with experience and memory of the events; they were 'extras', but not indifferent professional actors. Similarly, there is a focus on faces, with these 'actors' chosen for their faces, as well as their personal experience. Faces reflect history and memory, she notes. The filming took place "when it happened", in July, in "bright beautiful sunshine" to stress "the contrast between nature and human horror". Stressing the ordinariness of the background, along with its natural beauty, opens the viewer to contemplate the 'ordinariness of evil', part of its 'banality'.¹⁷

Not only natural brightness, but also humanly construed color takes on a special meaning. The color blue, the UN color, is highly emblematic and the lead character wears a blue T-shirt to symbolize her connection to UN authority, yet a T-shirt not a uniform, she is a translator, a civilian go-between. As a translator, Aida moves between groups and roles, she speaks for and to; she is a member of the threatened group but also a representative of the authorities, a potential victim but also a professional, with norms to follow. In the end, she remains helpless in the face of catastrophe. These tensions are portrayed through facial close-ups, adding to the film's drama and emotional power, as they express conflicts that many have experienced.¹⁸

The film dramatizes the events through the fictionalized Aida's eyes. This offers a clear example of what Dijana Jelaca (2016, p. 335) identifies as a woman's approach to war cinema and its tropes "by highlighting the intimate affective do-

¹⁷ In an analysis of photographic images of Nazi perpetrators, Lowe (2012, p. 189) writes, "Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' can be taken to mean that the spaces in which atrocities take place are often be nondescript, everyday and banal, and that the people who commit them may *appear* on the surface to be so as well" (italics in the original). Picturing atrocity in this way, he argues, "can lead the viewer into an imaginative engagement with the nature of atrocity, and the nature of those who perpetrate it" (*ibid.*).

¹⁸ The preferred reading of the film as stated by the director is general and universal, "I would like audiences to feel the world and life of Aida, and to think how fragile our societies are – how something so unimaginable can come so quickly, and how we humans can deal with it" (<https://womenandhollywood.com/jasmila-zbanic-on-revisiting-the-srebrenica-massacre-in-international-feature-oscar-nominee-quo-vadis-aida/>).

main of experience, rather than large-scale narratives and collective emotions”.¹⁹ A crucial point in the film is reached when Aida is asked to choose which of her own family member will survive and which will surely die, the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, conflate at this point.

To further authenticity, several of the main characters, including both the Dutch and Serbian commanders, are named and wear authentic uniforms. For the process of working through it is important to name the perpetrators, to put a face on those responsible. The intentions of the main perpetrators are clearly shown; any ‘banality of evil’ is located in the bureaucratic machinery that binds the Dutch forces, their supposed protectors, not the perpetrators. The Dutch command is shown as frustrated in their adherence to bureaucratic procedure, they are not hiding behind them as much as rule-followers whose lack of action leads, tragically, to the death of others. The action follows what are recognizable persons and events that are meant to reflect “what really happened”. As mentioned, actors were chosen for their resemblance to real persons, as was the location, another key element in creating the semblance of authenticity. Since some officials deny that these events occurred, Zbanic was refused access to the actual killing fields and was forced to find a similar-looking place.

Aesthetic representations of trauma position audiences with several possibilities, as mentioned above. One is that of witness, something particularly true regarding film documentaries. Fictionalized commercial films about traumatic events offer other options, including that of voyeur. There are also stricter limitations regarding time and patience; as Zbanic put it, how does one “show someone’s trauma in 145 minutes”, one of the acceptable time limits set by the film industry. In addition, she said, one does not want to “hit the audience over the head” with details, nor engage in the exploitation of violence. Both commercial/entertainment expectations and the language of film itself help shape what can be shown and how. There is the need to engage a multi-layered audience, not a select one, an audience entering the theater filled with expectations of being entertained more than enlightened. How does one balance those expectations and authentically represent the trauma of others, one’s own and that of strangers?

There are a number of dimensions to this problem, the audience is faced with authenticity claims, an accurate representation of what happened, who did what to whom, as well as the filmic sense of presence, of being there. Here authenticity

¹⁹ She also writes (2016, p. 335), “They are also films that persistently challenge the dominant Truths about ethno-national identity, gender, and their links to war trauma in the aftermath of a violent ethnic conflict. These films extend an invitation for an ethical encounter with difference, one that unsettles the spectator rather than resolves the moral dilemmas that may ensue.”

takes on additional meaning, not merely a claim to accuracy but also what it feels like to be in a particular situation, which is not so dependent upon specific actors and location but is more universal in scope. Through its use of image and sound, and the fact of being viewed in a darkened hall in which one is at once alone and together with others, filmic representations create the possibility of a collective mood and the sharing of an experience of 'trauma'. If accurately represented, this would raise questions among the audience, 'what would I do in such a situation', along with 'who did what to whom'.

In addition to representing the trauma of victims, one potential trauma left unspoken in "Quo Vadis, Aida?" concerns that of the Dutch soldiers put in place as part of a UN peace-keeping mission. The Dutchbat (Dutch Battalion) was there to prevent what is depicted as happening. What responsibility do they bear for this; are they perpetrators, helpless or willing bystanders, or themselves victims of failed bureaucratic procedure and the banality of evil? In Zbanic's film, one of Aida's frustrations concerns the Dutch commanders who in her eyes stand aside as the mass killing is ongoing. This is the intended meaning conveyed to the audience as well. Constricted by bureaucratic procedures as well as international politics, the Dutchbat seems paralyzed in its inaction. They await air support that never arrives and their actions regarding those they are meant to protect are constrained by rules that must be followed no matter what the consequence. Like the Jewish leaders in Hannah Arendt's representation of the Holocaust, they are depicted as at least partially responsible for what occurs, part of the problem not the solution. In 2002, seven years after these events, a Dutch government resigned after the publication of an official report on its military's role in these events.²⁰

One Dutch soldier who served on that mission said of himself: "Morally I am not only a victim, but also a perpetrator." He described "Quo Vadis, Aida?" as "another setback for Dutchbat" (<https://www.nporadio1.nl/nieuws/geschiedenis/ab7bdb5b-5ce8-4c3d-a614-7f24200acf83/dutchbat-veteraan-remko-de-bruijne-ikben-moreel-ook-dader>). The former infantryman claimed his group was not passive, as they were described in the film, but very active in their defense of the civilian population. Rather than passive bystanders to mass murder, the Dutchbat, he said, engaged in fierce fighting with the Serbian forces and "about 30,000 people survived because we were there". "The film is not about us, I know that. But the Dutch soldiers you see are passive and fearful... this image has been attached to Dutchbat for years." As he describes it, "the soldiers were trapped like rats, without a clear UN mandate and without proper armaments. For a long time, they were seen

²⁰ A new documentary, Coen Verbraak's *Srebrenica – The Powerless Mission of the Dutchbat*, broadcast on Dutch television, challenges that view.

as cowards and looked down upon". Given the expectation attached to military service, being described as 'cowardly' would surely give rise to feelings of shame and guilt, if not 'trauma'. That this description was felt unjust would only add to those feelings, with the film adding insult to injury.

From the cultural trauma perspective, the film is a reconstruction of an event intended to influence ongoing public debate about its meaning and at the same time affect the reparation of a fractured collective identity. While fictional, "Quo Vadis, Aida?" makes claims to being an authentic accounting of what really happened, through the ways and means of sound-enhanced visual media. The choice of location and actors reinforces this. The aim is to instruct and enlighten the audience, to create empathy with the victims, and make critical judgements about perpetrators while referencing real world events. "Quo Vadis, Aida?" leaves little doubt about who fits into those categories. A reflective, critical audience however is left room to distinguish those who carried out the depicted mass murder and those in whose name it was done. Less reflective viewers might accept this reconstruction as the true one, leaving them feeling enriched with historical knowledge. Still others might view this film through the voyeuristic pleasures of a war film, despite the creator's attempts to prevent it. The film ends with the hope of reconciliation between descendants of those directly engaged in the events depicted. This is also part of its message and its meaning. A historically aware cultural trauma perspective would situate the film in this contemporary context, while at the same time referencing the wider historical background, including the complicated history that led up to the events being depicted. It would also bring a comparative frame to further widen and deepen the analysis. Films are bearers of memory and filmmakers as carrier groups.

Finally, one can ask about those the film clearly identifies as perpetrators, the members of the Serbian-led militia. What of their perspective, can one speak of a trauma of the perpetrator? If so, how would it be represented in the film and what could this contribute to the healing process the film's creator intends?

Conclusion

Each approach brings its own interpretive framework, interests, and presuppositions to the study of what is identified as trauma. The clinical/medical model conceptualizes trauma as a pathological reaction to a real or imagined occurrence that induces destructive compulsive behavior in an individual. The aim of its theorizing is primarily practical, with articulation, treatment, and cure as its goal. What we have identified as the literary approach follows the medical model in its conception of trauma, as a reaction that upsets an individual's ontological security, resulting in a search for understanding and repair through aesthetic representation. Here too,

one finds a practical aim in the reconstruction of trauma, a cathartic healing process that engages sufferers and witnessing audiences in a reflective dialogue. The cultural trauma perspective conceptualizes trauma as integral to a process of social repair following a tear in the fabric of collective identity. Trauma is articulated within a process of meaning-making, consisting of conflictual narrative accounts of what happened, who was responsible, and what should be done to re-ground collective identity. As research paradigm, cultural trauma provides a framework for historical/comparative analysis, which contains the potential to inform the repair process, thus adding a practical aim to its essentially academic orientation.

Memory is a resource and a recourse in all three perspectives. In the clinical model and its literary adaptation, trauma is a fragmented, debilitating memory, one that is embodied as compulsive reaction, and thus must be reconstructed in narrative form to be understood. In its literary adaptation, this gives rise to such categorizations as the 'trauma novel' and 'trauma cinema', aesthetic representations which act as an aid in the process of articulating 'trauma' as it's working through, as the trauma is re-remembered. In the cultural trauma paradigm, memory is a resource in collective identity formation, as part of a 'trauma' narrative in the struggle to re-define who 'we' are after the fracturing of an established collective identity. Memory is also a recourse in that the notion of a shared past will serve as a foundation upon which to rebuild collective identification in the present.

"Quo Vadis, Aida?" can be fruitfully analyzed through each, separately and in combination. From the clinical and literary perspectives, the film can be approached as an attempt to piece together the fragmented memory of affected individuals, a process that would include the writer/director herself. For the latter, the film can be analyzed as a working through of personal trauma, the reconstruction of a memory that haunts and evokes strong emotions. The same can be said of those participating in the film as 'actors' and members of the viewing audience who have their own memories and personal experiences to work through. In this perspective, both 'actors' and audience bear witness to what are portrayed as real events. While fictionalized in its performance, with recognizable names and places, the film represents an event with a claim to authenticity. Still, viewing audiences might enter the theater with no prior knowledge and thus experience the events for the first time, making possible a thrill-seeking vicarious reaction.

From the cultural trauma perspective, the film is analyzed as an intervention into an ongoing debate concerning what happened and who was responsible for atrocities committed during the civil wars, some of which, like this one, were also adjudicated by the World Court. Just as in those legal proceedings, the film argues that a mass murder occurred and that it was carried out by soldiers under the command of recognizable leaders. As in the report presented to the Dutch parliament,

the film depicts the Dutch battalion and their UN superiors as responsible for their non-action. The film makes similar claims, placing the audience in the role of judge and jury to what they witness. Presenting these occurrences as personal and collective trauma aims at creating empathetic understanding in the audience and through that influencing world public opinion. The focus, then, is not so much on trauma as in the attribution of responsibility and social repair.

Through its creators, the film becomes a vehicle of memory-making and reconciliation, an attempt to affect how the war is remembered and how the aggrieved collectivities may move on together. From this perspective, the filmmaker is an intellectual, a translator between past and present, part of a carrier group, bringing a particular view of the past into the present. Where the individual writer/director Jasmila Zbanic stands seems clear in the final scene, where the young children from both sides of the conflict interact as children and not as enemies. Yet there are adults in the margins of this rather joyful scene whose faces show something else, including the main character whose expression is ambiguous. Aida looks into the camera, and the future, with such sorrow that one feels healing will be long in coming, if it comes at all.

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