



Amit Pinchevski

Transmitted Wounds. Media and the Mediation of Trauma

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'Media constitute the material conditions for trauma to appear as something that cannot be fully approached and yet somehow must be' (p. 3): this idea summarizes the double — epistemological and ethical — stakes of Pinchevski's research. For the author, the eminently technological operations of recording, transmitting and processing are constitutive parts of what he calls the 'mediation of failed mediation', that is, the rendering of a traumatic memory that was originally marked by resistance to narration — a resistance, in other words, that media witnessing challenges and, at the same time, incorporates. The book's introduction retraces the 'traumatic' thread that runs through media theory, indicating a path that starts with Walter Benjamin, passes through Marshall McLuhan and ends with Friedrich Kittler. While the first two examine the way in which media technologies participate in the formation of a sensory apparatus capable of reconfiguring the experience of modernity, Kittler interprets the contemporary digital technological dimension as an ontological redesigning of reality in a post-human perspective. Pinchevski derives his epistemology of media technologies from Kittler's work and develops his ethical and political view in a continuous reference to the philosophical thought of Emmanuel Levinas and the interdisciplinary work of Dori Laub and

Shoshana Felman.

The first chapter examines the radio broadcast of the Eichmann trial in Israel. The media event was, for many Israelis, the first sympathetic encounter with the trauma of the Holocaust that the Zionist identity politics of the 1950s had tried to remove, turning survivors into marginalized and speechless bodies. The radio, Pinchevsky points out, has the power to separate the body from the voice and to reconstruct a disembodied voice that is omnipresent and otherworldly, akin, in some respects, to symptoms linked with schizophrenic and paranoid psychopathology. This case study reveals that the national radio broadcast of the Eichmann trial made survivors' claims of truth legitimate for the first time, placing them in the gap between narratology and traumatography.

The second chapter analyzes the relationship between videography and testimony, focusing on the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. The production of an archive of the traumatic memory of the survivors, supervised by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub, 'combines oral history, the psychoanalytic session, and the television interview' (p. 45). Videotape technology is characterized by a predisposition to accessibility and distribution of content in

different contexts such as museums, classrooms and TV broadcasting, which, in the will of the promoters of the project, means an increased educational capacity. In addition, 'the videotape performs the Real that it inadvertently captures' (p. 54), preserving the performative aspects of testimony, such as the tone and cadence of the voice, gestures and nonverbal cues. Making the non-verbal visible, videotape leads the audience towards an understanding of trauma which cannot be reduced to the historical account.

The third chapter deals with traumatic exposure to the media, also known as vicarious traumatization. The existing PTSD clinical criteria (see DSM-V 2013) recognizes the potentially traumatogenic nature of visual media, however restricting it to work-related activities. The development of contemporary clinical history concerning trauma is studied through three events: the research project called 'the trauma film paradigm' in the early 1960s, the September 11 attacks, and the increase in diagnosis of PTSD among drone pilots involved in Afghanistan and Iraq wars. These three case studies involve three different media — film, television and digital — that are united by co-extensiveness between technical and mental. The most emblematic case of this direct relationship is that of drone operators who suffer a trauma due to a violence inflicted by them to strangers at a distance. It is a post-traumatic disorder caused by being an active participant in the production of a trauma that poses a moral problem. Can the aggressor and the attacked be understood under the same category of mental suffering? Pinchevski highlights here the shift from pity through media — at the core of Sontag and Boltanski's studies — to trauma by media.

The last two chapters analyse virtual witnessing and virtual therapy in the digital age. The book focuses on the New Dimensions in Testimony project which combines human-computer speech interaction capabilities with three-dimensional holographic imaging. The aim of the project is to create an immersive experience using the logic

of the database. At stake in this case study is the specific temporality fielded by digital media that produces the impression of a contemporary exchange between the witness and the public. For Pinchevski what is lost in the new temporality, based on discrete and semantically pre-classified narrative units, is the precariousness of the testimonial narrative. Emphasizing the side of the audience through a user-centered design, virtual testimony assumes the absence and the separation from witnesses as resolvable predicaments, erasing the incommensurability of past and present. The reification of deep memory generated by algorithmic logic erases the performative aspects of traumatic memory, raising ethical problems. In conclusion, virtual therapy — and in particular the clinical therapy called VRET (Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy) developed within the Institute for Creative Technology of University of South California in collaboration with X-box platform for treating war-related PTSD — is the latest and most controversial case study examined by the author. VR therapy exposes patients to virtual scenarios that recreate the traumatic event in a computer-generated and safe environment in order to achieve habituation to anxiety triggers. VRET can be used to both heal and train soldiers, blurring the lines between warfare and entertainment.

Transmitted Wounds is an archeology of the mediation of trauma from analog to digital that exposes the moral stance implied in media witnessing. Preserving and transmitting traumatic memories seems more difficult in the cultural logic of big data that invites users to assert their own presence at the expense of the vulnerability of the subject who experienced the violence. Nevertheless, the choice between the democratization of trauma through the feeling of pity and its neutralization remains an unavoidable necessity.

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