DEBATE: “SCREEN STUDIES AND THE FUTURE OF TRAUMA”

Kim Beazley Lecture Theatre
Murdoch University
4pm
Thursday 4th December 2008

Screen and visual culture were the dominant areas addressed in the abstracts submitted to the conference, as a result of which the organising team programmed a "screen culture & trauma " stream that runs throughout the three conference days, even though visual culture is indeed addressed in most other panels.

The conference closes with a debate entitled “Screen Studies and the Future of Trauma”. Participating in the debate are Felicity Collins (La Trobe University), Susannah Radstone (University of East London) and Janet Walker (University of California, Santa Barbara). The debate's chair is Rosanne Kennedy (Australian National University).

Order of Procedures on the Day

- 4pm the chair starts debate
- each participant speaks for 10 minutes highlighting aspects of the three days of conference and linking these contents to what they believe to be the key questions about or challenges for the future of screen studies' engagement (if any) with "trauma" as experience, condition, theory, and/or content of representation
- the chair formulates questions and requests expansions and rebuttal
- 4:55 pm the chair invites comments and questions from the audience
- 5:25 the chair ends the debate and the conference organising committee closes the conference
- buses will be waiting from 5.30pm to take delegates back to Fremantle

Since the time for the debate is limited we wanted to get started ahead of the conference. For this reason we asked Susannah Radstone to email us a few points that in her view summarise the progress and failures of the past eight years or so in terms of the ongoing discussion regarding the relation between screen studies and trauma theory as well as her view about the challenges for the future. Radstone’s ideas were forwarded to Collins, Walker and Kennedy who also responded by email. This email exchange is copied below (with very little editing done) to stimulate reflection prior to the debate. We will also video the debate in order to transcribe the debate's contents in view of its inclusion in a future publication.

Susannah Radstone

“I was asked to send round a few points to get us started for the closing debate about the development of trauma and screen studies over the last few years and about where and how the area might be developed in the future. I think I'll be as open as possible, so how about the following (written rapidly and off the top of my head) to get into the debating mode:

1. Looking differently: texts and theories
The theories drawn on by the trauma/screen studies (t/ss) area have become
canonized quite rapidly, but are there other approaches or theorists that might be helpful and if so, which disciplines/theoretical perspectives might have the potential to move the area forwards? Since trauma theory has drawn, in the main, from psychoanalytic and psychological theory, one place to start looking for new theories might be in this area, but would for instance, anthropology, with its interest in ritual and group process, also have useful input? And where else might we look for theories/methods that might enable us to look differently? Here, we'd need to discuss, first, what it is that t/ss has yet to engage with — and in my view, one question that gets raised but only to be dropped again, here, as elsewhere in the area of memory studies, is that of the processes involved in “group” and “collective” as opposed to individual remembering and forgetting. Where might we look for theories/methods to help us to understand these processes and what would a research “project” with this question at its heart look like?

2. Looking elsewhere
   a) Genre/’content’
   To date - and with some important exceptions - t/ss has tended to focus in the main on documentaries - mainly experimental - and/or on fiction/history films that are ‘about’ historical or individual catastrophe and suffering. While attention is paid to questions of narration, point of view and so on, it still seems to me that it is the explicit content or references of texts that draws them into the terrain of t/ss. So my first thought is about whether t/ss might benefit from considering a broader or more flexibly defined archive. In my view, t/ss's rather literalist approach to texts and their meanings is related to its return, post-pyschoanalysis, post-post-structuralism etc — to a revised theory of referentiality — but is there a case to discuss which genres might and might not be considered in relation to trauma and why, and why not?

   b) National cinemas
   Is there more to be developed in the area of trauma and national cinemas? Or does the t/ss area make (erroneous?) assumptions about the post-national nature of trauma cinema/s? Would a comparative study of traumatic national cinemas throw up interesting differences of genre/mode/style/address? Is trauma an equally appropriate or productive term for all national cinemas? And what is there to be said about the 'travelling' across time and space of trauma films?

Here we would need to think not only about texts but also and crucially, about spectatorship. What would a research project look like that set out to study the 'travelling spectatorship' of trauma films? This brings us to the question of spectatorship more generally.

3. Spectatorship/audiences
   a) Spectatorship
   To date, t/ss has tended “not” to follow spectatorship theory's more general impulse to examine the multiple or diverse spectating positions proffered by texts. Is this because of assumptions about trauma cinema as secondary witnessing? And is this related to notions of shock and dissociation? But what are the differences between being exposed to traumatic shock and sitting in the cinema watching a 'trauma film'? Does the cinema experience offer the possibility of diverse modes of spectatorship. Have gender/ethnicity/class/sexuality anything to contribute to the area of t/ss and spectatorship and if not, why not?
b) Audiences
Historically, screen studies has tended to develop by testing and refining theories and methods through textual analysis and following this with audience research. It might simply be my own ignorance, but I don't seem to have come across any examples of audience research in the area of t/ss. Is this because the material itself makes such research feel difficult? What might audience research add to our understanding of the field?”

Felicity Collins

“1. Several of Susannah’s points converge on the question of how a collective or a nation (rather than an individual ‘victim’) might be traumatised in the wake of a ‘holocaustal’ event or a founding trauma. The next step might well be a research project that looks at the capacity of the media to traumatisse audiences in different national, international and other contexts. Has the cultural theory paradigm been exhausted in this regard? Do we always need to look to other disciplines for new theories or do we need to do more detailed work with some of the theories we already have in cultural, media and screen studies?

2. National cinemas have been conceived of as a genre of international cinema, insofar as their audiences are more or less determined by the art cinema circuit and its relation to global Hollywood and media conglomerates. With the convergence of new media technologies of distribution and downloading, do we need to consider the future as well as the past of ‘trauma cinema’? What is the value, for instance, of archival research projects that look more closely at sub-genres of national cinema types, eg, settler cinemas and their revisionist narratives? How do these projects compete with or complement the funding of contemporary, post 9/11, post Abu Ghraib projects around war, terrorism and global media?

3. Spectatorship theory and audience studies have functioned in the past as the great divide between screen studies and media studies; at the same time, cognitive-formalist and historical studies of spectatorship have attempted to shift the semiotic-psychoanalytic paradigm from its central position in spectatorship theory. Have we exhausted the feminist-modernity paradigm inaugurated by Hansen et al in the late 1980s when it comes to understanding the constitution of historical audiences and modes of spectatorship in early, classical and late modernity? To what extent has trauma studies been able to draw on this paradigm?”

Janet Walker

“First of all, I’d like to thank the organisers for this enlivening idea to debate, and Susannah for setting out some thoughts and categories to get us started. Being the third person to chime in, I’m pleased to have the benefit of Felicity’s comments as well. Things may look very different once we’ve presented our talks and heard from other conference participants. I’m sure my own view of what and whither trauma studies will have stretched by then. With that proviso, here are some preliminary comments, subject to change, I’m sure!”
1. With regard to the trauma/screen studies (t/ss) canon, I’m always struck by its simultaneous tendency toward ossification on the one hand, and (all too often unobserved) internal contradiction on the other. Susannah very modestly refrained from putting her “own stamp on things” in setting out the terms of the debate, so I’ll go ahead and state for the record that she’s been exemplary in her close readings of the explicit and implicit assumptions of the various trauma theories and tss – with an emphasis on “various.” (Hmm, I hope it’s OK while debating to praise one’s collocutors.) Even if we stay within the realm of psychoanalytically or psychologically informed trauma theory, there are enormous differences of terminological and topographical definition. There are, of course, those who think of trauma as a violence or a “traumatic stressor” (DSM-IV-TR) that happens to a person; those who think of it as a psychological wound, pain, or influx of excitations (some of the Freudians); those who try to define it at the interface of reality and imaginative elaboration (Haaken, Waites, Reviere). The options only multiply as we move from trauma theory to its application in trauma screen studies.

So I hope I don’t disappoint when I say that I agree both with Felicity’s statement that we need to “do more detailed work with some of the theories we already have” and also with Susannah’s bold suggestion to glean more widely. I am inspired by Francis Guerin’s and Roger Hallas’ characterization of trauma studies “as a means to reintroduce [after a poststructuralist sejour] a political and ethical stake in the representation of the real without regressing to the very notions of mimetic transparency it has striven to overturn” (The Image and the Witness, 3). I am even (written like a loyal humanities scholar) interested in certain social science approaches precisely for this possibility of connecting the individual and the collective to which Susannah alludes. The “social suffering” trilogy by Arthur Kleinman and Veena Das is very impressive in this regard. Anthropology, yes! And, as I will discuss (will have discussed) my presentation, critical human geography.

2. With regard to the issue of the national, I would tend toward an intermedial and post-Westphalian perspective: yes we should look through the lens of trauma studies at various media, certainly not only cinema that thematizes trauma nor even cinema alone; and we should look at the transnational networks for the capture, assembly, storage, and circulation of media.

And yet, while a global civil society in which we all agree that there are some things that happen or are perpetrated -- violences and atrocities -- that are simply beyond the pale SOUND good, in fact we need to be careful to hang onto cultural specificities that attend regional life worlds while we critique transnational formations. For instance, with my colleague Bhaskar Sarkar I’m editing a volume on DOCUMENTARY TESTIMONIES: GLOBAL ARCHIVES OF SUFFERING in which contributors (including Mick) concentrate on different local audiovisual testimonial archival initiatives. But as we read the chapters by the contributors (who do a fantastic job of being both supportive and constructively critical of the respective missions of the different archives [including Mick!]), it becomes clear that nearly all of these archives seek to further their own interests through participation in a translocal culture of human rights or global civil society. But this model comes with its own problems having to do with how to devise universally acceptable principles and standards; who gets to adjudicate and settle disputes that arise from incommensurable outlooks and values, and so on. Political imaginations of a
planetary order would seem to raise the specter of a new colonialism...AND YET trauma studies seem to have a lot to offer this struggle for more hospitable futures, in terms of the identification and amelioration of social suffering.

3. There is this tendency to hang back from active spectatorship of “traumatic texts” (whatever they might be), out of respect for the suffering subjects or subject/authors. But I have often wondered (sometimes even in print) about the different viewing experiences of, say, people who have suffered childhood sexual abuse and people who have not.

Anyway, some critics have warned against the retraumatizing potential of films and writing. I’m thinking, for example, of Dominick LaCapra’s (rather bitter) complaint that Claude Lanzmann’s SHOAH works to retraumatize the audience and that Shoshana Felman’s and Dori Laub’s writing on SHOAH redoubles the problem.

I do not share his fears. There is plenty to be traumatized by in this world; films and writing are the least of our problems, or may even, in certain cases, be part of solutions. I am interested, therefore, in ideas of vicarious trauma; that is the traumatization of psychologists working with trauma survivors and the traumatization of viewers looking at traumatic images. Ann Kaplan, who has been collaborating with one or more clinicians, seems to hold out hope that vicarious trauma can include productive empathy, and I would tend to agree.

In any case, with regard to issues 1, 2, and 3 – all of which have to do with expanding and deepening our perspectives and going out in the world -- it would be great if we trauma studies scholars could participate in policy-making or at least converse with policy-makers….as a debate such as this one might prepare us to do.”

**Rosanne Kennedy**

“Thanks everyone for your stimulating thoughts. Looks like it will be a terrific debate. I thought as moderator that, at this stage, I’d identify and add to some of the threads that have developed (not sure if I should be ‘adding’ as moderator!). The four main threads that have developed so far: genre, spectatorship/audience, national/post-national/transnational cinema and contexts, and theory/method.

1. On the issue of genre, and following on from Susannah’s comments, it might be worth considering the ways in which popular genres such as melodrama, horror, gothic and new genres such as animation (*Waltz with Bashir* and *Persepolis*), mediate trauma, and how these genres expand the canon of trauma cinema.

2. The issue of genre raises questions of audience and spectatorship: do popular genres attract different audiences than trauma films which use documentary or realist forms? Do audiences identify certain kinds of films as ‘trauma films’? How does genre impact on the address to audience? Under what conditions are spectators positioned as witnesses, rather than, for instance, as voyeurs or consumers? Are audiences positioned as ‘witnesses’ when trauma is mediated through, for instance, a horror or melodrama rather than a documentary ‘about’ trauma?
3. On the question of theories, I wanted to second Janet’s comment about the possibilities of ‘social suffering’ as a frame that links the individual and collective. As well as the social suffering trilogy that Janet mentioned, Veena Das’ book *Life and Words* (2007) has some productive reflections on ‘the event and the everyday’. How might a ‘social suffering’ paradigm inform trauma and screen studies? In literary studies of trauma, critics have been concerned with developing understandings of trauma that can be applied in very different cultural, national and post-colonial contexts (ie, developing alternatives to the Holocaust as paradigm of trauma). In a recent issue on post-colonial trauma novels, several critics have argued for a shift from understanding trauma as ‘event’ to ongoing conditions of everyday violence (insidious trauma). What implications, if any, does this kind of work have for trauma and screen studies?

4. Felicity’s comments about national cinema and media conglomerates suggests a host of questions concerning the commercial imperatives of trauma cinema, and how these imperatives impact on genre, and on national/transnational circulation. How do genre, funding and audience familiarity/expectation shape the kinds of films that circulate nationally and transnationally? (ie, Holocaust film circulates transnationally, while this is less the case for say Australian, Irish or South African cinemas of trauma.) How do national funding bodies shape the development of national cinemas of trauma? What kinds of ‘traumatic events’ get represented in films that circulate transnationally rather than nationally? For instance, human rights documentaries raise issues about how visual media and film are used to further particular kinds of international campaigns, and are addressed to particular audiences.”