EXPLORING TRAUMA

PHILLIP SIPIORA

Languages of Trauma
Edited by Peter Leese, Julia Barbara Köhne,
and Jason Crouthamel
Toronto University Press, 2021
408 pp.
Hardcover (ISBN 978-1-4875-0896-8 $95.00

THE TERM TRAUMA HAS BEEN IN USE SINCE AT LEAST GREEK ANTIQUITY: *traúma*, (a body wound or shock produced by sudden physical injury) and *traumatikós* (psychological painful). In the 1690s, "physical wound," is derived from medical Latin, from Greek **trauma** "a wound, a hurt; a defeat," from PIE ***trau-**, extended form of root tere- "to rub, turn," with derivatives referring to twisting, piercing, and so forth. The history of the diction of trauma also includes a sense of "psychic wound." Trauma, described as unpleasant experience that causes "abnormal stress," has been in currency since 1894.[1] Trauma is now, undeniably, a master social, psychological, medical, and cultural concept.

Contemporary times have not neglected pervasive human trauma, and what is particularly impressive about *Languages of Trauma* is its archeological probing of disciplinary and interdisciplinary of explanations, explorations, and cultural relevance. For example, Jennifer Bliss analyzes graphic discourse to dig deeply into the ways in which memory is interpreted. She explores Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadows of No Towers* (2001), which chronicles experience within, and reactions to, the terrorist attacks of September 1, 2001. Bliss examines, through powerful images, the relationship between responses, personal and public, to the dramatic breach of the specific and the general, which results in a complex tapestry of trauma, thus bolstering the volume's promise of articulating the multiple languages of trauma. We are

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 15, NO. 1, FALL 2021. Copyright © 2021. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

introduced to the complex network of trauma and memory revealed through intersections of multiple layers of visual representations in the text(s) under examination.

A major contribution of this volume is reflected in its polysemous title—Languages—that announces a collection of disparate, yet theoretically interconnected analyses. Further, this study embraces dynamism in its examination of an exceptionally complex phenomenon as it presents a series of living, evolving, articulations of trauma and a corresponding range of myriad effects.

Some of the effects of trauma are illustrated, copiously, in the wealth of American Fiction that specifically explores traumatic moments and movements, especially Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1898), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), among so many fine books dealing with trauma. Further, contemporary American literature reveals a rich weave of layers of visions and versions of trauma and its effects. Philip Roth, for example, engages trauma in most of his major texts, and "Roth and Trauma" is an area of research led by Aimee Pozorski. As Roth scholar Maggie McKinley has observed, "Many Roth texts that deal with trauma—the expert on this subject is Aimee Pozorski. She wrote a book called 'Roth and Trauma' and has published elsewhere on the topic too. She talks about Roth's books evoking historical traumas across generations, but there's also the trauma of chronic pain (*The Anatomy Lesson*); of guilt (*Nemesis*); of loss (*Letting Go*) and more . . . it's all over *The Human Stain*, too, *vis a vis* the trauma of racism and maybe of passing, as well as perhaps more typical PTSD from the Vietnam War."[2] Scholars of Twentieth-Century American literature have long been aware of the pervasive presence of trauma in Roth.

Norman Mailer includes dimensions of trauma in many of his most significant works, both non-fiction and fiction: *The Executioner's Song* (1979) and *An American Dream* (1965). In these award winning works, Mailer chronicles the piercing traumatic representations and effects of love and death. This volume on trauma is accutely insightful because it underscores the complications, nuances, and multi-disciplinary complications involved in penetrating such a vast and deep topic. The editors describe their goal of approaching trauma from perspectives that have been neglected: "Our purpose in conceptualizing and editing the spire has been to advance conversa-

tion and trauma studies on how to uncover and analyze historical and contemporary aspects of trauma that tend to be tabooed or neglected."

Readers are introduced to seminal developments in understanding trauma in a comprehensive analysis by Julia Barbara Köhne and Raya Morag, which specifically engages complementary perspectives, including behavior identified as perpetrator trauma or "post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms." The inclusion of perpetrator trauma, in addition to victim trauma, is a major shift in trauma studies and the discussion is illustrated in the cinematic documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2012), which explores perpetrators' practice of theatrically reenacting past extreme violence. And, in multiple other cases, new paradigms that attempt to explain trauma have emerged from the rigorous research projects articulated in this volume, which are strategically essential to the understanding of this most complex sector of human behavior, especially in understanding its role in the tapestries of interrelated classes of trauma. Trauma is no longer simply trauma, in life or in literature and film. For a powerful treatment of literary representations of trauma, see Geoffrey Hartman.[3]

Section Four essays capitalize on film as an explanatory/interpretive medium and they are especially germane, in part, because the cinematic power of images, graphic and otherwise, coupled with rich textures of sound, often come together in a rich orchestra of logic and emotion that investigate and reveal the complex cultural relationships between trauma and ethics. This new way of reading trauma interrelates neuropsychiatric, psychotraumatological, and therapeutic concepts into a synthesis of "historical consciousness," which dramatically enlarges the scope, relevance, and definition(s) of trauma, surely a master concept now across multiple disciplines. What is particularly powerful in examining these new interpretive landscapes in cinema is their undergirding panoply of powerful analyses drawn from documentary footage of Indonesian genocide that took place in 1965–66. We are informed, in a memorable recounting of cultural inheritance, that many perpetrators of the genocide are portrayed as cult figures, even to this very day, which raises core ethical questions about trauma and its reception, contemporaneous and later on, even many decades later. One of the many compelling features of the volume is its attention to the individuals and relevant others who have successfully dealt with trauma. As the Introduction states, "The authors also highlight a common theme through the collection, namely, the need for more serious attention to the voices and

opinions of survivors." The overall purpose is poignantly accentuated in Adam Lowenstein's examination of the nuances of both collective trauma and individual, which are carefully illustrated in George Romer's renowned film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and other signature films, like his vampire focus, *Martin* (1978). Romero's works, collectively, provide glimpses into what Cathy Carruth calls "individual trauma," which is slower, quieter, and/or more private . . . and translating individual into collective trauma through a vocabulary of horror" (Lowenstein, 293). Romero's major contribution to trauma studies, as Lowenstein sees it, is to formulate a new model of traumatization: The combining of horror's fantastic language system with documentary's realist vocabulary. The result is a rejection of viewers' understanding language systems as they have traditionally conformed with cinematic genre. Romero's principal success, according to Lowenstein, is the synthesis of the documentary impulse with the fantastic impulse, which creates the possibility of works of cinematic art with significantly richer contexts of trauma.

One of the many salient derivatives of this essential volume is the connection between the narration of traditional forms of violence and an emerging center of traumatic experience—the environment or, more specifically climate change, which brings with it a new lexicon and a range of descriptive and interpretive sensibilities. These new dimensions, forms, and languages of trauma combine to offer a particularly challenging horizon in trauma studies.

NOTES

1. For definitions of trauma, as well as citations of usage, see "Trauma." *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP, 1971: 3873. For contemporary insights into trauma, see https://thesupercoda.com/trauma-salon/.
2. Geoffrey Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature." *European Journal of English*, 2003, vol 7, no 3, pp, 257-274.
3. McKinley, Maggie. "Roth Question" Email to Phillip Sipiora. 23 June 2021.