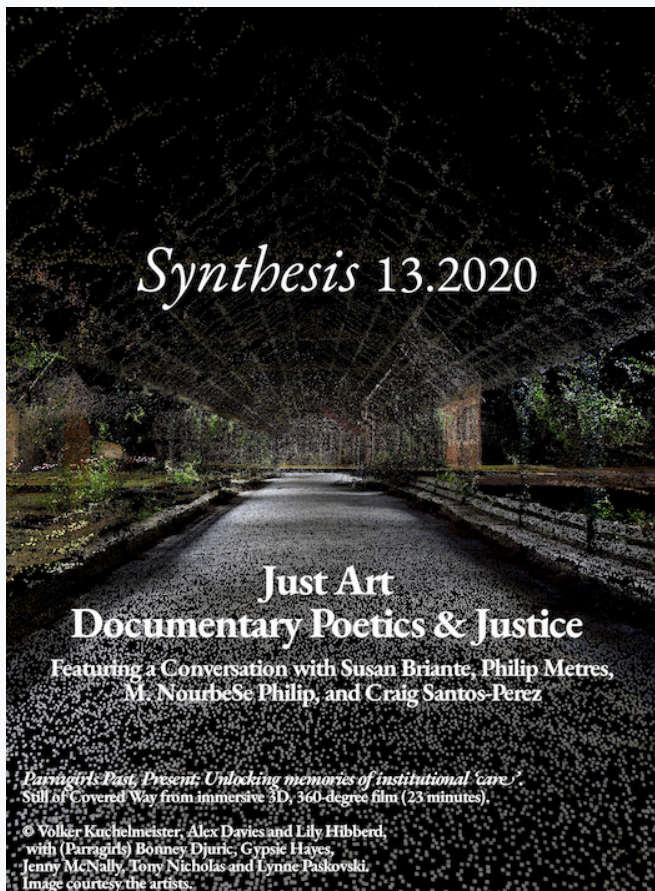


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 13 (2020)

Just art. Documentary Poetics and Justice



Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni, eds. **Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma**

Iro Filippaki

doi: [10.12681/syn.27567](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.27567)

Copyright © 2021, Iro Filippaki



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni, eds. *Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2020. Pp. 320

New humanities for the new wounded

In one of the outtakes of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), the epic nine and a half-hour documentary comprising testimonies of survivors, perpetrators, eyewitnesses, and scholars of the Holocaust, four surviving Jews are filmed by Lanzmann and his crew walking down a cobbled street in Corfu, Greece. As they awkwardly reach the camera, one of the men (Armando Aaron), starts talking, as if hypnotized, explaining (in French) that on June 9, 1944, the Jews of Corfu (numbering 1,650) were ordered by the Germans to gather near an old Venetian fort in the city.¹ The scene is cut short after, but as the outtake continues, the four men's walk towards the camera crew is filmed again and again, its continuity sometimes broken up by traffic, sometimes interrupted by the presence of locals—the walk is stubbornly repeated a few more times. Because Lanzmann's *Shoah* is “not a documentary but a performance” (Hirsch and Spitzer 16) practice takes are, perhaps, to be expected, and have garnered considerable scholarly attention in the last decade. In these outtakes, alongside interviews that were not used, one finds evident elements of Lanzmann's pre-production planning, while his voice is often heard behind the camera. During one of Corfu takes, as the men walk toward him, Lanzmann is heard, exasperated, exclaiming “ce n'est pas possible!”

It is unclear what Lanzmann refers to at that moment, but it is tempting to suggest that this impossibility is not only pertinent to the mechanics of direction, but, at least partly, to the incommensurability between representation and traumatic experience as well. In this regard, *Shoah*'s outtakes, which became available to the public in 1996, just as the humanities were forcefully entering the field of trauma studies, exemplify “the concept of the impossible,” as Cazenave writes in relation to the unused material (xxxv), while grounding what Lanzmann himself terms the “fantastic emergency” that the Holocaust was (*The Karski Report*). In this light, watching the men walk towards the film-making crew, looking strange and estranged in their hometown, straddles the line between reality and fantasy. The Holocaust happened to these men; yet, there they are.

This has been the prevalent problematic within the humanities regarding traumatic experience until fairly recently: trauma, usually an event, many scholars have argued, manifests itself as a rupture in time, memory, and language. For all intents and purposes, trauma has for long been considered unspeakable, unrepresentable, and unnarratable: negative space. To this, the terrors of the Holocaust, both those recorded and those imagined, contributed greatly. Decades of scholarly and public debate on whether the Holocaust can be represented or verbalized, and if, how, and when it should be represented, have also seen an astounding number of traumatic events on scales national and transnational. Employing the Holocaust as an immeasurable measure against which all traumatic representation must be compared, certain “disciplinary traditions” are perpetuated via the institutionalization of “collective memories that establish a horizon of interpretation by positing models that are worth imitating and questions that are valid to pose” (Ball 37). Within this “disciplinary imaginary,” as Karyn Ball has called it, what are the right questions to ask, and how can the humanities challenge the established validity of the academic and public machine of inquiry?

This question forms the shared focus of the essays that make up Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni’s 2020 edited collection titled *Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma*. The presences, sounds, and new assemblages revealed by continuous crises rather than the absences and aporias of the traumatic (cerebral) event constitute the main focus of writing. Combining the historical pragmatism and the established theoretical lexicon of traumatization the collection tells an alternative story of twentieth century trauma in order to trace the “cultural narratives and practices of healing” (x). True to Catherine Malabou’s paradigm-shifting challenging of the Freudian trauma framework, the writing in this collection re-theorizes what trauma and healing mean for the “new wounded,” as well as what survival and counter-survival might mean for current trauma studies (Margaroni 240). The brief introduction of the book that serves as an erudite literature review of the field of trauma studies is a valuable source that takes stock of key concepts in traumatology, centering on examining the ways through which it has moved away from the concept of trauma as unspeakable event, while paying “attention to collective rather than individual traumas, and to systemic forms of trauma produced by ongoing, slow forms of violence” (xvi). In the three parts of the book—“Holocaust Trauma and the Ambivalence of Healing:

Irreverent Take”; “Mass Trauma, Art and the Healing Politics of Place”; and “Intimate Healing”—the contributors take on different media ranging from canonical literature to experimental film both in terms of content as well as of form, in order to examine the extent to which “traumatic narratives might be conceived as restoring possibilities of healing and mending” (xv). In order to move towards healing, it is argued in the collection, we have to be attuned to and welcome the “disturbances” created by trauma, as is proposed in the collection’s first essay (Callus 8).

By reading Maurice Blanchot, Georges Perec, and Theodor Adorno among others, Ivan Callus explores the unifying force of the fragment and the disturbance that it may cause to the dominant narrative of trauma and its traditionally linear forms of remembering. The contributors seek to inhabit the ellipses created by trauma and its fragmentation instead of glorifying the ruin, as has happened throughout the twentieth century; after all, “trauma, healing, representation devise different rhetorics across time” (Callus 9)—the prolific attention to Lanzmann’s filmic fragments proves as much. Authors such as Arleen Ionescu, Lucia Ispas, Olga Michael, and Nicholas Chare explore controversial factual, fictional, and hybrid testimonials (for example Holocaust survivor Mozes Kor’s testimony of her forgiving concentration camp doctor Mengele, Roberto Benigni’s film *Life is Beautiful*, Alison Bechdel’s graphic representation of family trauma, and Teresa Margolles’s 2016 concrete art installation) expressing contemporary perspectives that move beyond the accepted norms of trauma representation. Ionescu argues that even though Mozes Kor’s “speech act” of forgiveness is a necessary disturbance in the taboo trauma narrative of the (female) Holocaust survivor, it nevertheless defeats its own purpose, while Ispas argues for the healing value of Benigni’s comedic approach to the Holocaust. In all cases, exploring alleged misrepresentations of trauma proves fruitful not least because it grants critical distance, “a distance that allows the individual to continue living in the present, although one cannot disengage completely from the traumas of the past,” as the editors write.

Such critical and often irreverent explorations revisit norms of traumatic representation and refocus the concept of trauma, altering the conditions of victimhood and perpetratorship, and reshaping “the contemporary moral economy” as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman had suggested in 2009 (7): the name ‘trauma’ is given to our “new relationship to time and memory, to mourning

and obligations, to misfortune and the misfortunate” (Fassin and Rechtman 276). Under this conceptual umbrella, it is possible to talk of the traumatized as if they are one unified group, as Nicholas Chare brilliantly does in his analysis of Teresa Margolles’s art installation commemorating and protesting the brutal murder of Karla, a Mexican transgender sex-worker. By using in her installation a slab of concrete taken from the crime scene where Karla was killed, Margolles performs what Chare terms “visual synecdoche” of traumatization (211), compelling attention to concrete as the key material of modernity, “urban ugliness” (213), and thus the exemplary constitutive element of “traumas caused by a specifically Mexican experience of modernity, one that is allied to rapid industrialization and the globalization of the economy, particularly at the US-Mexico border” (213). Margolles’s act of composing her artwork with Karla’s photograph and the block of concrete that was taken from the scene of her murder, and is allegedly splattered with Karla’s blood has been criticized for its seemingly harsh minimalism. Chare astutely observes that concrete has a dark history, straddling the line between remembering and forgetting: concrete is especially associated with Holocaust trauma, since it featured prominently in extermination camp construction, but it also figures prominently in mob-related crimes. Despite its synecdochical, and therefore abstract connections, and because of its minimalism though, by its very presence, concrete marks the literalness of trauma, and is, moreover, the material of commemoration: there are two thousand, seven hundred and eleven gray concrete slabs, or stelae, presented in commemoration of the Jewish genocide in Berlin, Germany, and countless concrete architectural elements in the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda. For Lanzmann, too, concrete seems to be a silent but powerful protagonist: absent-mindedly book-ending the testimonies in some of the Corfu outtakes are wide shots of large slabs of concrete in the Jewish cemetery. Through the aesthetic of the concrete, Lanzmann establishes “that the annihilation ‘took place,’” creating a “spatial visibility” of the Holocaust (Koch et al 21), in which trauma is absent and yet visible.

Similarly, Margolles’s concrete block exists on the border between death and immortalization, becoming yet another fragment that interrupts traditional representations of trauma, while linking holocausts of the past with contemporary rhetorics of trauma. Moreover, the artwork importantly escapes simplistic labelling of victim and perpetrator by drawing attention to power and sovereignty

and their discontents via the materiality of concrete. Perhaps ironically, through such practices, it could be argued that the noted disjunction between factual reporting and testimony that has caused a schism between history on the one hand and memory studies on the other in Holocaust studies (Hirsch and Spitzer 400) may be bridged. Perhaps the healing that is associated with Margolles's careful "meditations on memory and loss," as Chare terms her art practice (218), bring us closer to Hannah Arendt's controversial, then, point regarding the Eichmann trial:

at no point [...] either in the proceedings or in the judgement did the Jerusalem trial ever mention even the possibility that extermination of whole ethnic groups [...] might be more than a crime against the Jewish or the Polish or the Gypsy people, that the international order and mankind in its entirety might have been grievously hurt and endangered (Arendt 275-76).

The synecdoche of cement in the entirety of Margolles's work, Chare argues, is an instance of political attestation that protests division of any kind, including heteronormativity and the violence it engenders, while rendering the bodies of the dead, and the always already dead, visible, thus leading us towards the potentiality of recuperation. Concrete's etymological origin (from the Latin verb *concrecere*, meaning 'to grow together') further hints at its aesthetic role in Margolles's representation of Karla. Its role is traumatropic, to use Allen Feldman's conceptualization: borrowed from botany, traumatropism's definition as the reactive growth of an organism resulting from a wound can usefully describe the clustering and flourishing of "local communities and entire societies" that may "reorganize their identities, histories, and projects around the curvature of a chosen wounding" (Feldman 230). Instead of traumatropism's usual indication of society's "historical stasis" however (Feldman 230), Margolles's use of concrete is an invitation for growth, and collective action, linking the audience, the new wounded, and past traumas together.

What are we then to make of the out-of-context, blood-splattered presence of the concrete slab? Even concrete, it seems, is transformed when placed in the hermeneutic circle of trauma. Its formlessness and endless potential for transformation preludes Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity explored in the final essay of the volume. What Margolles does in her art, the whole collection of essays by Ionescu and Margaroni does, too. Following Malabou, Ionescu and Margaroni's volume deals not only with the necessary disturbance of the fragment, and the representations of the new wounded within the new humanities, but also with trauma as the realm of the monstrous. "The monstrosity

of our time” (168), Malabou has poignantly written, shifting the trauma paradigm, is what we, humans, have become: creatures of an “unknown identity,” whose “suffering manifests itself in the form of indifference to suffering” (Malabou xii). The toll of constant cerebral suffering is a new kind of survival, fit for the “new wounded” who remain unhealed by psychoanalysis and neurobiology alike (Malabou xiii)—the semantics of this survival is Margaroni’s object of investigation.

When reading Margaroni’s eloquent addition to Malabou’s theorization of the new wounded, I found myself wondering for how long this “cool indifference” of certain traumatized individuals had been observed (Malabou 17). Could it be, for example, that upon seeing the four survivors walking down an ordinary street in Corfu, and upon hearing the hypnotic sounds of Aaron’s testimony, Lanzmann saw how representation of genocidal trauma became saturated with the disaffection of the screen and therefore, somewhat monstrous and impossible? What was recorded in *Shoah*’s outtakes, we might argue, is an example of the metamorphosis, as per Malabou, of the new wounded in their effort to survive and be resilient--what Margaroni calls “the psychically exhausted subject, [...] that ghostly, lifeless remnant that emerges in the figure of the Holocaust survivor, one trapped in the ambiguous zone between the no-longer living and the not-yet dead, unable to give expression to anything other than history” (237).

As Margaroni aptly observes, what Malabou terms “cool indifference” might in fact, in many cases, hide an “affective depth” (Margaroni 240). In this sense, the four survivors’ perceived indifference becomes monstrous in yet another way: touched by extreme psychical and lesional trauma, their survival becomes entangled with the story of the tremendous violence they endured. Watching them approach from afar, one is reminded of Robert Antelme’s depiction of the SS ontology as the most pervasive rule of the Buchenwald camp in his memoir, *The Human Race* (1957):

At Buchenwald, at roll call, we would wait for [the SS] for hours. Thousands of us, standing there. Then there’d be the announcement: ‘Here they are! Here they are!’—while they were yet far off (Antelme 22).

The death that has contaminated the survivors is forever repeated in their seemingly eternal walk, since “*suffering is formative of the identity that endures it*” (Malabou 18, emphasis in original). Despite Lanzmann’s desacralizing line of questioning (Felman 219), the outtakes (and the actual film, too, as Felman notes)

present wounds hidden under another kind of indifference for Aaron in the Corfu outtakes: the inability to “*meet* the question” posed by Lanzmann regarding what happened in Corfu and when, avoiding the inquirer’s gaze, and attempting instead to “*reduce* the question’s difference,” (Felman 221, emphasis in original), by answering in a monotone. Throughout the multiple takes, Lanzmann never gets tired of being “at once the witness of the question and the witness of the gap—or of the difference—between the question and the answer” (Felman 221), sometimes repeating the last fragment of the answer, and other times interrupting the flow of the answer with another question, thus breaking through the interviewee’s seeming *indifference*. In this way, Lanzmann works through the impossibility of traumatic representation and recuperation (although the impossibility always returns), offering, perhaps, what Margaroni observes as the key operation of counter-survival, namely, tenderness, as “a passionate attunement to an other’s suffering; a caring that tends to and holds the vulnerable other through and against death” (Margaroni 248).

Margaroni’s consideration of suffering is consistent with Malabou’s view of all trauma as an “amalgam” and agrees with her view of survival as “a biopolitical strategy, one that appears to be central in the capitalist management of bodies” (Margaroni 239), while making a valuable contribution to resilience and the narratives that are associated with it. Through her theorization of counter-survival, Margaroni provides examples of resistance against “(mere) survival as the ambiguity of this flat existence that is neither life nor death but an indifference to both life and death” (Margaroni 236). Echoing the other authors’ explorations of (mis)representations of the new wounded, whose contemporary over-visibility has led to a kind of invisibility (Mieke Bal, this volume), Margaroni’s analytic of counter-survival shifts “the focus of trauma studies [...] from Holocaust-centric reflection to the increasingly terror-haunted world where individual and collective traumas have become much of an everyday occurrence, as well as the fate of refugees in search of a better place to live and the victims of natural disasters” (x). The new wounded are in need for a new humanities of trauma and survival. All in all, this book marks yet another, necessary turning point in trauma studies by enriching the narrative and cultural terminology surrounding trauma and denoting representation of trauma as a way to healing and recuperation. The highly original and well-written essays of the collection show the value in the current mood of traumatic (mis)representation and, as is the explicit goal of the

volume, “pluralize and decolonize [...] theories of trauma, taking into consideration the varied transcultural contexts that shape both individual and collective experiences of violence, terror, victimization or injustice” (xxx). The contributors take up Jacques Derrida’s suggestion to move away from the “a-priorism” and de-aesthetization of Holocaust discourse; they embrace the impossibility of traumatization in order to reach forgiveness and the possibility of recuperation (Derrida 24), ultimately offering a concentrated glimpse into what the new humanities can do for trauma studies.

Iro Filippaki
National and Kapodistrian University

¹ Legacy Database File: 5512. The Claude Lanzmann SHOAH Collection consists of roughly 185 hours of interview outtakes and 35 hours of location filming. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1004584>

Works cited

- Antelme, Robert. *The Human Race*. Trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler. The Marlboro Press/ Northwestern, 2009 [1957].
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin, 2006.
- Ball, Karyn. *Disciplining the Holocaust*. SUNY Press, 2008.
- Ben-Naftali, Michal. Interview with Jacques Derrida. Trans. Moshe Ron. Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, January 8, 1998, Jerusalem. https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203851.pdf. Accessed May 10 2021.
- Cazenave, Jennifer. *An Archive of the Catastrophe: The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah*. SUNY Press, 2019.
- Fassin, Didier, and Richard Rechtman. *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton UP, 2009.

- Feldman, Allen. *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- Felman, Shoshana, et al. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Taylor & Francis, 1992.
- Hirsch, Marianne, and Leo Spitzer. "Gendered Translations: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*." In *Gendering War Talk*, edited by Miriam G. Cooke and Angela Woollacott. Princeton UP, 1993.
- Koch, Gertrud, et al. "The Aesthetic Transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah.'" *October*, vol. 48, The MIT Press, 1989, pp. 15–24. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/778946.
- Lanzmann, Claude. *Corfu*. Accession Number: 1996.166. Film ID: 3406, 3407, 3408, 3409, 3410, 3411, 3412, 3413, 4693, 4694, 4695, 4696, 4697. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1004584>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021.
- . *Shoah* (1985).
- . *The Karski Report*. 2010. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=me7wxaebkRM>. Accessed May 10 2021.
- Malabou, Catherine. *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. 1st ed, Fordham UP, 2012.