

Trauma and Position

by 3,14's text contributor **Johnny Herbert**

thinking in terms of trauma's abstract and oblique ubiquity—its impersonal intimacy, its rhetoric—to approach “experience” as more than just “what happens” and “what is told”, whilst recognising the importance of these acts. Trauma is an “impersonal rhythm”⁴ that works across us for which Benjamin's analytics of “position” must be undertaken again and again in order to somehow trace such a rhythm; “working-through” as psychoanalysis terms it. But this impersonal rhythm is, as I hope I have started to make clear, felt as “far off” but also, most troublingly, as most touching, mediated by clearings of throats, moans, and silences, as much as by narratives.

Marcelo Brodsky's and Joy's work presented at Kunsthall 3,14 combine to tell us of a contemporary struggle and what we might think of as the oblique knowledge of an unintentionally transmitted ambience of mutual traumatization for which the “possession” of experience might be understood not in terms of “owning” an experience, but being overtaken by an experience, being possessed by it, by its impersonal rhythm, a rhythm that also binds us.

Hopefully aiding an approach to Marcelo Brodsky's and Joy's work presented here at Kunsthall 3,14, I would like to offer a few thoughts on trauma, caught in its widespread impersonal intimacy and conceptual slipperiness, in tandem with Walter Benjamin's call to focus on the “position” of a cultural producer within conditions of production in a passage cited in the exhibition text accompanying the presentation of video work by Joy.

First, by way of example, I'd like to start on a personal note:

In recent years, having fairly recently come upon an image of my grandma with a shaven head taken during the time of her internment in one of Stalin's infamous gulags (work camps) during the Second World War, I wonder whether I have come to increasingly feel and “hear” the reverberations of this unspeakable period. Whilst she was alive, it was nigh on impossible to get her to speak at any length about these work camps, the conditions of which are notorious for their depravity and squalor. It's strange to think that she was in such places, that my tiny Polish grandma had survived viciously hard labour for two years in the north of The Soviet Union. Having recently become a parent myself, in stories my mum has told me about my grandma and what she was like as a mother, this has, in turn, instigated some thoughts regarding my relationship to both my grandma and my mum. I've come to realise that it's almost as if the trauma of the gulag (amongst other things, of course), is something I grapple with everyday—obliquely, of course; I'm fortunately not queuing for stale bread or regularly witnessing the deaths of people around me. When it's felt like this, it's a transgenerational chain of interaction along which my grandma, my mum, and I have varyingly tried and try to defend, support, and express ourselves in our overlapping lives, yet the impact of those two years in two gulags have meant a considerable amount of energy and activity has been spent minding—in the double sense of both caring for and steering clear of—the shattering experiences of 1940–1942.

There are thousands like me with this specific story, yet everyone has similar stories, unknown to them or brutally lived and ever-present in their consciousness. What is called “the record”—“documentation” included—is mur-

⁴ This is a term I am reappropriating from Leo Bersani's use of it in a different context (Leo Bersani, 'Sociability and Cruising', *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*, 45–62).

murous and flickering, an impersonal yet intimate sound which invites the impersonalisation of identification with it, but is merely akin to a sketch of a scenography for a play never written. Testimonies of traumatic events strive at a description of something so total that, in a sense, sound—a clearing of a throat, a moan, a silence—is least insufficient. Narratives fail and an anxiety of ambience emerges in the struggle to grasp and possess an experience which one underwent, an uninvited experience that reconfigured all other experiences, an experience for which one was more or less contingent, a vessel for shrapnel, a measurement device for what Lauren Berlant has called “social negativity”.¹

In the essay “Trauma and Ineloquence”, Berlant has written ebulliently and provocatively about the rhetoric of testimony, and the social traction of this rhetoric. She asserts that “the testimonial”, as a rhetorical form, is “also evidence for what has been. Symptoms that condense history are like dead metaphors, challenging their readers to make them live.” What Berlant is putting forth, here, is the idea that trauma relies on retraumatisation in order for any kind of transmission of “what happened”, and that an audience/listener needs to be open to that possibility. Some might call this a capacity for empathy, but keeping it in Berlant’s register lessens the problems of objectifying a feeling of an event, “hold[ing] a place still enough to enable [...] continual return”,² that is in fact shifting according to the life lived in its shadow. Trauma is as a notion, then, at once specific, indexed to an event, as well as akin to a base cause for the world being as it is, a world in which we are all more or less traumatised, whether knowing it or not. This is not to disabuse the traumatised of their unprivilege, but to demand the privileged seek out their traumatisation, indeed perhaps the traumatisation of their very privilege. Another word for this terrain might be “class”.

1 Lauren Berlant, ‘Trauma and Ineloquence’, *Cultural Values* Vol. 5:1, 2001.

2 Lauren Berlant, ‘Trauma and Ineloquence’, *Cultural Values* Vol. 5:1, 2001.

3 Buck-Morss, ‘Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (I)’, *New Left Review*, July/Aug 1981.

This approximately returns us to Benjamin’s assertion of the importance of the “position” of a cultural producer within its conditions of production, rather than taking at face value its declared revolutionary aims, or suchlike. In this passage from the essay ‘The Author as Producer’ (fittingly, an undelivered talk for the Paris Writers’ Conference of 1934), Benjamin speaks of the “position in” the “relations of production”, using a Marxist term. By way of further context, we should bear in mind that Marx wedded this notion with “forces of production”: the former conventionally understood as the labour process and exploitation, the latter as machinery and productivity. So, in calling for a critical approach of discerning a technical apparatus of a work—literally, its “technique”—and its relation to the techniques of extracting labour and exploiting lives (relations of production), the extract’s seemingly dispassionate, “academic”, modest proposal of a kind of literary analysis in fact censors the founding of something more politically traumatic. As Benjamin maintained, cultural producers (unintentionally) trace a connection between a past and the present, tracing a reverberation of trauma, we might say. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it, Benjamin understood

“[t]he relationship of material reality to aesthetic expression was one of mutual demystification. Elements of material history were required in order to interpret artworks so that these cultural ‘treasures’ ceased to be ideological accoutrements of the ruling class. But the obverse was true as well: art provided a critical iconography for deciphering material history, so that its elements might enter into a revolutionary constellation with the present.”³

So a work’s “critical iconography”, its mode of representing imagination, a mode intertwined with “technique”, is also, for our concerns here, impacted with varying severity by traumas past and present (as much as this distinction is still important, here) that continue to reverberate globally.

The suspending of a work’s appeal, its provocation, its narrative, is, when