The Performance of Trauma in Moving Image Art

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—Dirk de Bruyn

ABSTRACT

This text examines the capacity of experimental or avant-garde film to perform and communicate traumatic experience. I identify and analyse key films from the 40s to the present that perform aspects of overwhelming experience through their approach, structure, content and perceptual impact, mapping a trajectory from analogue to digital moving image practice. I argue for the inclusion of Peter Gidal's 70s conception of 'materialist film' into the new genre of 'trauma cinema' through its capacity to articulate unlocatability and perceptually perform dis-orientation and the flashback effect, all identified characteristics of digital moving image practice. The argument addresses two research questions: Can 'materialist film' model traumatic memory and perform the traumatic flashback? Does the capacity to articulate trauma's unspeakability and invisibility give this practice a renewed relevance in the digital media environment of information overload? My phenomenological 'traumatic' reading of materialist film steps beyond Gidal's original anti-illusionist rationale to incorporate critiques effectively mounted against it by the founders of a 70s feminist psychoanalytic counter-cinema. My contemporary re-reading further re-evaluates the Minimalist turn in painting and sculpture after the Second World War, arguing that this development is not essentialist or visionary but makes visible implicit mechanisms of denial and erasure. I further argue that the initial traumatic impact of industrialization on the body's perceptual apparatus, traceable through the advent of cinema and train travel, is communicated by such moving image art. The development of digital technology marks a new cycle of such perceptual re-balancing for which materialist film is uniquely positioned and which it critically addresses. The historic thread outlining materialist film's marginalised practice running through my analysis of films by Maya Deren, Robert Breer, James Benning, Martin Arnold and Peter Tscherkassky draws on historic parallels within recent neurological research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that re-claims Pierre Janet's previously discounted concept of dissociation. I use Chris Brewin's dual processing model of trauma, a product of recent neurological research, to describe not only materialist film's performance of traumatic memory and the traumatic flashback but also the process of materialist film's subjugation and belated recall within screen studies.

INTRODUCTION

This text consists of an introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion. The first three chapters review both the history of experimental film and trauma research and outline the study of trauma incorporated into screen studies to this point. Identified gaps in this appropriation are then explored further through the analysis of specific films in the next four chapters. I consider the history of avant- garde cinema in the 20s, 70s and in the contemporary digital age and revisit in some detail a key moment in the 70s when both a feminist counter-cinema and a materialist or structuralist film practice takes hold. The 70s saw an explosion of independent and artist filmmaking enabled by public access to 16mm film equipment and further marked by the migration of film art out of the 60s underground into the academy.

Although Michael Zryd observes that avant-garde practice has a level of continued activity in the academy (Zryd 2006: 17-42), the presence of this practice is marginal in comparison to the theoretical and public profile developed in screen studies by a 70s feminist counter-cinema. I argue for a two-fold recovery of the marginal area of experimental film. My preference for the term ‘materialist film’ for experimental cinema, initially advocated by film theorist and practitioner Peter Gidal, is clarified in Chapter 1. The initial recuperation of a materialist practice is in relation to the emergent area of ‘trauma theory’ exemplified by the work of Soshana Felman, Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth recently appropriated by feminist film theory, particularly through the genre of ‘trauma cinema’ developed by Judith Walker. To this incorporated ‘trauma theory’, I add the restored profile of Janet’s concept of dissociation and Brewin’s dual processing model of trauma from the groundswell of neurological research into trauma generated by new image scanning technologies. The second strand of recovery, contained within this extended ‘trauma theory’ framework, is for a renewed materialist practice within contemporary digital media. To this end I chart a historic narrative of recovery through specific films with a materialist pedigree, analysing the structure, content and perceptual impact of these films in relation to characteristics, concepts and approaches appropriated from ‘trauma theory’ and recent neurological research. This tactic shapes materialist film as a forgotten practice or subjugated discourse returning belatedly, like the flashback in trauma itself; to visibly occupy a position of relevance in both ‘trauma cinema’ and time-based arts.

As this research involves a contemporary revisiting of the rationale for materialist film and the 70s feminist criticisms of this practice I keep Michel Foucault’s insight into the historical nature of discourse in mind, that it is made up of ‘real, successive events, that it cannot be analysed outside the time in which it occurred’ (Foucault 1972: 200). This is a point E. Ann Kaplan, a key commentator on feminist independent cinema since the 70s, also makes in her recent review of global feminism in stating: ‘cultures exist within discursive frameworks that are very hard to think beyond at any specific time. The same is true for academic discursive fields such as feminist film theory’ (Kaplan 2004: 1237). This revisiting recognizes such historic specificity for the positions taken up for and against a materialist practice. But I also understand Foucault’s insight to open up the possibility for a recovered cultural value for materialist film’s unfulfilled promise in screen studies beyond the 70s. The lost visibility of materialist film does not have to define that practice’s relevance forty years on. Post-structuralism’s interest in multiple viewer positions and difference legitimizes a re-reading of materialist film from a contemporary perspective. As Lawrence Grossberg outlines: ‘The meaning of a text may depend on its formal and historical relations to other texts (its intertextuality)’ (Grossberg 1992: 40). The recovery mounted here occurs on different terms (trauma theory) and in a different context (digital media) to that from which materialist film first arose.

I offer two experiences bringing aspects of trauma and experimental film practice together that assisted in formulating this writing. One is my experimental film practice in Australia that began in the late 70s (de Bruyn 1976) and continues to this day and the other involves my contact with trauma and stress in my personal and professional life. As a film artist I witnessed the drift to marginalization and subjugation of experimental film facilitated by a lack of critical writing, funding and screening opportunities in favour, successively, of an emergent national cinema, short fiction film, documentary and later the institutional embrace of ‘new’ media (see de Bruyn 2006). Though involved in a formalist cinema, I always understood this practice to have a political and social dimension informed by my migrant background speaking to and from the margins (de Bruyn 1986, 1987) and began to recognize in an emerging new media practice traces of my experimental filmmaking roots (de Bruyn 1997, 1998).

Furthermore insights emerged from the early 90s related to my career as a Social Worker and personal family breakdown. A relationship between experimental film and trauma was initially suggested to me by a pamphlet printed by SECASA (South East Center Against Sexual Assault) that I came across in my work as a Social Worker. It outlined how traumatized victims of abuse stored memory of abuse as fragments cut-up and separated from each other, often continuously re-playing parts of that memory as intrusive thoughts, whilst the initial shock remained. This reminded me of the serial and repetitive structures often found in materialist films and the shock, panic and dissociation I lived through during my relationship break-up and my earlier experience, as a migrant child, of my father's mental collapse. This pamphlet also introduced me to Judith Herman's discerning practice and theory-based feminist analysis of trauma and recovery (Herman 1992), enlisted in the following chapters. On the basis of such influences I speculated on whether, for example, an interactive CD-ROM storing its information in RAM (Random Access Memory) was not a model for such traumatic memories. Like the frozen repetitions of trauma, navigation of such a CD-ROM involved repetition: unexpected events could be randomly programmed in and repeat playing did not change the material on the Interactive CD-ROM.

The study of trauma is concerned with the impact of overwhelming experience on the body and on memory. Trauma's apparently random architecture is defined through the first two chapters and takes its cue from Bessel van der Kolk who approaches traumatic stress: 'with a blend of objective science and an awareness of the sociopolitical contexts in which trauma is embedded' (Van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth 1996: ix). Chapter 1 reviews the current social and political discourse on trauma in screen studies. It documents the appropriation of 'trauma theory' concepts such as Caruth's 'belatedness' and Laub and Felman's 'witnessing'. Walker's 'trauma cinema' and research into the flashback in trauma and cinema by Maureen Turim are identified as extensions of psychoanalytically influenced 70s feminist film theory. I identify the theorists of a materialist film that sources its practice back to painting and the cinema of the 20s European avant-garde. The 70s split between the two avant-gardes, represented here by a feminist counter-cinema on the one hand and a formalist materialist film on the other, is examined in detail for its role in the dismissal of materialist film subsequently rendering it unavailable to inform the current relationship between trauma theory and screen studies. Even though the first half of my text analyses theoretical discourse, I have included some illustrative film descriptions in preparation for a second half that aims for a greater integration between theory and practice by analysing specific films.

Beginning with Jean-Martin Charcot's research into hysteria, Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the psychological research into trauma.

This survey identifies the early dismissal of Janet's concept of dissociation in favour of the psychoanalytic readings of trauma shaping the 'trauma theory' integrated into screen studies to this point. Recent neurological research utilizing new imaging technologies into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), implicit and explicit memory systems and the role of the amygdala and hippocampus are detailed. This research, drawing upon the interactive dual processing model of trauma developed by Brewin and others, resurrects Janet's previously subjugated concept of 'dissociation'.

Chapter 3 integrates the reviews undertaken in Chapters 1 and 2 to discuss homologies between Brewin's dual processing model and the avant-garde split outlined in Chapter 1. The insertion of this new neurological research into trauma's relationship to screen studies offers the most fertile opportunity for new knowledge. This chapter sets up a recuperation of materialist film for the rest of my analysis. Succeeding chapters analyze a series of films in detail for their suitability for inclusion in Walker's 'trauma cinema', through a prism of trauma incorporating contemporary neurological research.

Chapter 4 analyses Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (dir. Maya Deren, 1943) and connects her theoretical writing on vertical and horizontal editing structures to Brewin's dual processing model. A historical review of the varied analyses of *Meshes of the Afternoon* opens another perspective on the 70s avant-garde split, as the same commentators offer conflicting textual analyses of the film. Framed through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology Chapter 5 looks at a traumatic effect identified in the direct perceptual performances of Robert Breer's abstract animation practice, focusing specifically on *69* (dir. Robert Breer, 1968) and *Fuji* (dir. Robert Breer, 1974). In this analysis the flashback in film and trauma converge. Chapter 6 presents *Landscape Suicide* (dir. James Benning, 1986) as a work meriting recognition next to the feminist experimental documentary form considered trauma cinema's prototype. I enlist Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* to locate James Benning's practice and describe the gutting of content in *Landscape Suicide* as performing Laub and Felman's witnessing of trauma. Martin Arnold and Peter Tscherkassky's recent found footage films are the focus of the final Chapter 7. Again, from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I argue that in this found footage practice a psychoanalytic textual analysis, the method employed to dismiss materialist film from feminist film theory, returns as the performed subject inside these films. All these four chapters' films link through their relationship to a materialist practice surviving the 70s as a subjugated discourse and concludes with the belated re-emergence of this practice within digital time-based media arts, a recall manifest in the structure of these found footage films.

CHAPTER ONE

TRAUMA, CINEMA, FEMINISM AND MATERIALIST FILM

This foundation chapter surveys the established and forming relationships between trauma and film in screen studies. I record the development of the new genre of ‘trauma cinema’, the viewer’s position within it, research into the nature of the filmic flashback and work on the general traumatic nature of digital media. I trace screen studies’ appropriation of trauma theory back to a similar appropriation of psychoanalysis and French critical theory at the point of emergence of feminist film theory by Laura Mulvey and others in the 70s. The filmic flashback is tentatively traced back to a 20s European avant-garde and I further outline how this new film form responds to the traumatic impact of the First World War. It becomes apparent that the relationship between this 20s avant-garde and feminist film theory remains mute within current discourses on trauma within screen studies. The second half of this chapter explores this gap.

The most direct selective claim of heritage to 20s European avant-garde cinema is made in both the US and UK by the theorists of a late 60s co-operative generated explosion of film art production, which names its exemplary formalist form ‘structuralist film’ and later ‘materialist film’. Critically, at this time, Peter Wollen’s “The Two Avant-gardes” (Wollen 1982 [1975]) asserts differences between a political and formal avant-garde, separating materialist film from feminist film theory as its feminist commentators argue against formalism in favour of a political feminist counter-cinema. I place this split in the previously stated gap in the trauma - screen studies discourse to strengthen the cautious link in the historic record between ‘trauma cinema’ and 20s European avant-garde cinema and to clarify materialist film’s absence.

Encounters with Caruth, Felman and Laub

‘Trauma theory’ formed in literature studies by Felman, Laub and Caruth introduces this new area to screen studies in the last decade (Radstone

2008: 10). Four commentators examine aspects of the relationship between avant-garde or experimental film and trauma, all writing for two special dossiers within the journal *Screen* published in 2001 and 2003. Firstly, Turim draws parallels between flashback phenomenon in trauma and its use in avant-garde and mainstream cinema (Turim 1989, 2001), secondly, Thomas Elsaesser suggests an inherent traumatic position and effect for digital media (Elsaesser 2001), thirdly, Walker proposes a 'trauma cinema' (Walker, J 1997, 2001, 2005) whose vanguard is constituted from a feminist experimental and documentary avant-garde and fourthly, this avant-garde is identified by Kaplan as delivering the most empowering viewer position in films about trauma (Kaplan 2001, 2005).

Susannah Radstone notes the key role of work influenced by US psychoanalysis from history and literary studies by Felman, Laub and Caruth in shaping the early *Screen* debates (Radstone 2001: 188). Those aspects of trauma theory matching *Screen*'s critical and theoretical history are the first incorporated within its pages. Feminist film criticism, constituted in psychoanalytic readings of melodrama and a semiotically formulated counter-cinema found its voice in *Screen* through the 70s when politics and cinema moved out of the street into the academy and into theory. Consequently Radstone's expectation for 'trauma theory' lay in its capacity to consolidate work on displacing models of passive spectatorship: 'Trauma could revise theories of spectatorship by considering the relations between fantasy, memory, temporality and the subject' (Radstone 2001: 191).

70s Critical discourses in *Screen* successfully imported the French critical theory of semiotics, structuralism and post structuralism by Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Foucault and Julia Kristeva into screen studies through contributions by Kaplan, Wollen, Mulvey, Gidal, Stephen Heath, Constance Penley, Raymond Bellour, Annette Kuhn, and others. Mulvey's key feminist critique, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey 1975) is representative of these developments. Maggie Humm places personal concerns into a social political framework: 'understanding the personal as political –how identity is constructed and represented- is the task of feminist theory' (Humm 1997: 179).

As a 70s 'Cine-Feminist' Claire Johnston understood the importance of referencing criticism to the prevailing power structures: 'feminist film criticism can only emerge out of an analysis of the existing cinema' (Kaplan 1977: 399). Technically precise semiotic and structuralist vocabularies, coupled with the psychic insights of psychoanalysis were mobilised to frame the textual analysis of Hollywood melodrama that in turn supplied the basis for a feminist 'counter- cinema'. For Kuhn textual analysis renders ideology visible (Kuhn 1982: 84) while counter- cinema challenges dominant cinema (Kuhn 1982: 157). Such analysis performs Foucault's search for historic discontinuity where, according to David Shumway, 'he looks for ruptures, breaks, gaps, displacements, mutations, shifts interruptions, thresholds' (Shumway 1989: 19). Lacan and Louis Althusser are used to describe how the language of cinema imparts its embedded ideology onto the spectator (Humm 1997: 20). Lacan asserts that the unconscious is structured like a language and Althusser's 'interpellation' describes the production of the subject from ideology: 'All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects' (Althusser 1997: 130).

This discursive formation (Foucault) responds to the contemporary post-modernist situation by appropriating 'trauma theory'. Trauma theory has a reputation for finding 'a way through and beyond' (Radstone 2007: 11) what Caruth perceives as an 'ethical and political paralysis' (Caruth 1991: 181) at the epistemological heart of deconstruction for which Foucault identifies a number of criticisms of structuralist practices. Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato and Jen Webb outline these as, firstly, an inability to talk about what is repressed or *not* known, secondly a difficulty in explaining transitions or discontinuities between discourses and thirdly that the rules of a knowledge database may be quite different to the rules adopted for their use by different groups (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000: 8). In my analysis here concepts related to 'trauma theory' such as Caruth's 'belatedness' and Janet's 'dissociation' from the psychopathology of trauma address such gaps. The re-emergence of dissociation within recent neurological research into trauma is a major theme pursued in Chapter 2.

Elsaesser places the emerging relationship between 'trauma theory' and post-modernity in relation to the emphatic technological shifts represented by digital media. For Elsaesser: 'it is as if trauma appears 'behind' post-modernity, charting its political blockages (both critically and negatively), implicitly acknowledging but no longer having to regret, for instance, the fact that the grand narratives have been exhausted' (Elsaesser 2001: 200). These technological shifts include a pre-occupation with surface also identified by Vilém Flusser (Flusser 2000) and a proliferation of what Elsaesser calls a 'fake' authenticity in documentaries (Elsaesser 2001: 197). Such ambiguity finds particular expression in the experimental autobiographical works Walker places in 'trauma cinema' and informs her concept of 'disremembering'. The move from analogue to digital technologies re-shaping screen studies in the academy is described by Elsaesser's analysis. The fragmentation and multiplication of moving image forms, multi- platform delivery systems, increased accessibility to the means of production and a continuous churn and acceleration of software development reflects this change. This speed, fragmentation and splitting of events are also the effects 'trauma theory' describes. Trauma fragments affect and splits the individual psyche, rendering it un-locatable.

Trauma theory's relationship to the analysis of sexual abuse, exemplified in Herman's feminist text on *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman 1992), provides the most compelling rationale for its appropriation into screen studies. Herman makes the connection: 'Public discussion of the common atrocities of sexual and domestic life has been made possible by the women's movement' (Herman 1992: 4). Sexual abuse and its denial presents as an extreme but critical issue in screen studies for a feminism concerned with the politics of scopophilia, sexual power relations and patriarchy. In the 70s Mulvey appropriated psychoanalysis 'as a political weapon' (Mulvey 1975: 6) to deconstruct patriarchal structures in cinema and the move into trauma theory redeploys this tactic, re-coupling strands of theory to deal, as well as sexual abuse, with the demands of a new political and technological situation.

For an area of screen studies that successfully incorporated 70s feminist voices of empowerment, the appropriation of 'trauma theory' is a critical move worth banking on. Yet Radstone registers a note of caution for this latest adoption: 'too enthusiastic a take-up of trauma risks displacing the important insights from film theory concerning spectatorship, mediation and fantasy' (Radstone 2001: 191). How severe would such a displacement be? If an episteme as used by Foucault 'is the product of certain organising principles which relate things to one another' (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000: 17), could the introduction of trauma theory mark a shift from one episteme to another, or at least a shift in the discursive formation through which it is expressed? Or are all these differences of opinion all just part of the same discourse? Radstone's ambivalence and the radical technological shifts Elsaesser addresses suggest epistemic conversion. If so 'trauma theory' might at least prove useful in articulating those discontinuities that its incorporation brings about.

Traumatic events impact directly on the individual, but also the social and beyond. Kirby Farrell suggests that the 'contagiousness' of personal traumas can lead to a general social impact 'when particular social conditions and historical pressures intersect' (Farrell 1998: 12). Herman understands its witnessing as precarious: 'to speak publicly about one's knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims' (Herman 1992: 2). For Laub and Felman also, an encounter with traumatic events impacts both victim and witness so that 'the encounter with the real leads to the experience of an existential crisis in all those involved' (Felman & Laub 1992: xiv). Kristeva points to a similar effect operating on the viewer through the abject in horror film (Kristeva 1982). Could this contagious rupture perform an 'existential crisis' on the discursive formation itself? If this Lacanian tuche´, this break into the real, migrates from the personal into the social and enters the political and theoretical, what crisis or trauma does it deliver to those theoretical framework embracing it?

Caruth explains trauma's suffering's repeated return. In an event's normal processing the instant of 'seeing' becomes 'knowing'; yet in trauma this instant is seen but remains unknown, returning over time repeatedly to an unknown or 'unspeakable' gap. Consequently Caruth identifies: 'a larger relation to the event which extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing' (Caruth 1997: 208). Belatedness and latency are central to Caruth's understanding:

> Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimensions of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct way of seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically may take the form of belatedness (Caruth 1995: 6).

Felman and Laub outline trauma as 'an event without a witness' (Felman & Laub 1992: 75), focusing on the process of testimony and witnessing which, despite its fallibility, manages a direct and productive communication of its trauma. Felman and Laub's partnership brings together acute interpreters of literary and psychoanalytic texts and gestures able to read and listen to the human narrative for its gaps and hesitations (Felman & Laub 1992: xiv). For Felman and Laub this is about 'moving from the literary to the visual, from the artistic to the autobiographical, and from the psychoanalytic to the historical' (Felman & Laub 1992: xv). Their method, a synthesis of psychoanalysis and literary studies, locks unwittingly into that visual and historical space screen studies occupies. Though such a traumatic gap is more viscerally emptied and perceptually severe and not specifically credited to patriarchy, it has affinities with that feminist textual analysis previously identified by Kuhn (1982: 84).

This collaboration is a de-constructive machine assembled to traverse the most extreme field of Derridian 'différance' where trauma's non-traces are only recoverable through what Elsaesser identifies as 'a different kind of hermeneutics' (Elsaesser 2001: 196). We are displaced inside the nonterritory of Roland Barthes' un-locatable sign (Barthes 1981: 52-53). Performing this hermeneutics of reading unspoken truths 'that are yet inscribed in texts' (Felman & Laub 1992: xiv) on Radstone's wary questioning struggles to bring into view the intertwining of trauma's unspeakable non-traces with digital's un-locatable future:

> Does it (trauma theory) answer to a new historical/cultural context in which there is 'no there there'? And if so, whose context, precisely, is that? Or have the reconfigurations of 'modern' space and time performed by contemporary electronic technologies produced tectonic shifts that only "trauma" can describe (Radstone 2001: 190).

Elsaesser answers 'yes' to a complicity between digital media and trauma. For him the image has indeed become un-locatable within digital media. Lev Manovich also notes that both location and scale are discarded in the digital layering of imagery (Manovich 2001: 172). Elsaesser points to a rise in 'in-authenticity', characterised by the infiltration of the fake in documentary and the role of re-enactment there, to situate a 'traumatic' status for the 'moving image in our culture as the symptom without a cause, as the event without a trace' (Elsaesser 2001: 197). Hal Foster also hunts down such a traumatic condition in *Return of the Real* (Foster, H 1996); 'this thing of trauma', resident in Cindy Sherman's 'artifice of abjection'. I examine Vilém Flusser's view that the status of the image is further traumatised by the malleable, now painterly rather than photographic digital image (Flusser 2000) in Chapter 3.

Elsaesser identifies trauma theory as 'not so much a theory of recovered memory as it is one of recovered referentiality' (Elsaesser 2001: 201). Digital media approaches the difficulty of presenting the un-presentable via gaps, absences and traceless traces through architecture and structure. The reflexive focus for the artist here is even more about fitting elements and fragments together structurally. Is Felman and Laub's interpretive witnessing capable of mapping a terrain transgressing accepted conventional cause and effect to morph into the logic of wormholes, time warps, parallel universes and the layering and jog shuffle of the digital editing system? This landscape invokes the space of un-locatability and postponed effect mapping Caruth's belatedness: 'Trauma is fully evident only in connection with another place and another time. Belatedness: neither inside or outside, neither one place or one time' (Caruth 1995: 8).

Towards a Trauma Cinema: Walker, Kaplan and Turim

Both Walker and Kaplan identify a cinema for articulating trauma which Walker names ‘trauma cinema’ and whose exemplary form emanates from an independent feminist project as the voice of the creative non-victim. For Kaplan this is an independent self-reflexive personal cinema communicating trauma’s fragmentation, flashback and hallucination. Turim points to the 20s avant-garde cinema as the technical or structural source for the flashback.

Trauma Cinema (Walker)

> By trauma cinema I mean a group of films that deal with a world shattering event or events, whether public or personal. Furthermore, I define trauma films and videos as those that deal with traumatic events in a non-realist mode characterized by disturbance and fragmentation of the films’ narrative and stylistic regimes (Walker, J 2005: 19).

80s and 90s Feminist counter-cinema films use fragmented ordering and repeated imagery with unusual angles, rapid editing and non-synchronous sound to disrupt narrative. Walker identifies this cinema as that most capable of communicating trauma’s effects: ‘contemporary women’s experimental autobiographical documentary practice represents the vanguard of the trauma cinema form’ (Walker, J 2001), noting that these films ‘approach the past through an unusual admixture of emotional affect, metonymic symbolism and cinematic flashbacks’ (Walker, J 2001: 214).

Walker’s concepts of ‘traumatic paradox’ and ‘disremembering’ frame the non-realist disturbance and fragmentation she identifies in ‘trauma cinema’. Caruth’s theory of belatedness indicates that not all aspects of a traumatic situation are available for recall. Not only is a level of uncertainty created by delayed recognition but also narrative after recall is a mixture of truth and fantasy or metaphor. Elsaesser notes that as a result of Caruth’s displaced recall, ‘trauma also suspends the categories of true or false, being in some sense performative’ (Elsaesser 2001: 199). For Walker a feminist experimental autobiographical documentary form effectively communicates this state.

The ‘traumatic paradox’ stresses the contradictory nature of recall of traumatic events (Walker, J 2005: 4), its mixture of accurate and counterfeit memory, of real and fantasy events. David Payne understands this blend of mistakes, forgetting and accuracy to point to the genuine nature of the events recalled: ‘memory errors are not bothersome anomalies to be explained away or minimalised, but rather they reflect the normal processes by which we interpret the world around us’ (Payne &

Blackwell 1998: 53). Such mistakes in remembering power an emotive force for transforming the real into metaphor. Walker coins the term 'disremembering' for this synthesis of embellishment and blunder (Walker, J 2005: 80).

For the genre's vanguard Walker highlights a number of feminist experimental autobiographical documentaries dealing with past traumatic events. These films use strategies 'for representing reality obliquely, by looking to mental processes for inspiration, and by incorporating self-reflexive devices' (Walker, J 2005: 19). The architecture and structure of such 'narratives' have an attraction, an ambiguous and elusive presence, communicating meaning through structure as well as content. For Walker *The Ties That Bind* (dir. Sue Friedrich, 1984), *Daughter Rite* (dir. Michelle Citron, 1978), *Confessions of a Chameleon* (dir. Lynn Hershman, 1986) and *History and Memory* (dir. Rea Tajiri, 1991) demonstrate these characteristics. For example, the soundtrack in the experimental documentary *The Ties that Bind* presents Friedrich's mother's memory of Nazi Germany counterpointed to intimate and sampled images of home life and politics in present day Chicago. For Jane Feuer in *Daughter Rite*: 'the more personal it becomes, the more political it becomes' (Feuer 1980: 13). Combining Payne's real and metaphor mix *Daughter Rite* punctuates suggestive optically printed and repeating fragments of home movie footage into the conversation between two sisters relating their love-hate relationship with their mother. Super 8 home movies of a mother and daughter moving to each other is repeatedly cut short of an embrace. A rape is retold directly to the camera. Similarly to this rape, in *Confessions of a Chameleon* Lynn Hershman intimately talks her diary directly into the camera, recounting childhood and marriage at 15, enlisting the viewer as confidant and psychoanalyst.

The position of the Viewer (Kaplan)

> We are less interested in developing a new genre of trauma than in addressing what is most important about, and defining of, trauma- namely, how it marks not the cinema but the viewer (Kaplan & Wang 2004: 9).

Kaplan breaks down the viewer's relationship to trauma into four genres. She states that melodrama is 'able to conceal traumas too painful to confront directly' (Kaplan 2001: 203). The trauma is contained because trauma is introduced, worked through and resolved at a distance. In the horror film the spectator may be vicariously traumatised. The joyride offers no ethical or empathic resolution. Films about torture and concentration camps can also operate in this way. News broadcasts offer up a cavalcade of trauma scripts on war, rape, a bushfire or aeroplane crash for voyeuristic consumption. Kaplan situates the witness as creative non-victim in a fourth modality: ‘the spectator is addressed as witness, arguable the politically most useful position’ (Kaplan 2001: 204).

As examples of this fourth ‘witnessing’ modality Kaplan cites *Meshes of the Afternoon* (dir. Maya Deren, 1943), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (dir. Alain Resnais story: Marguerite Duras, 1959) and *Night Cries* (dir. Tracey Moffat, 1989). With silence, lack of dialogue or closure and images intermittently breaking into her thoughts, *Night Cries* witnesses an Aboriginal daughter’s mixture of anger and care for her dying white mother. The daughter responds to her death at film’s end curled into foetal position. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* employs a subjective stream of consciousness delivery, promoting an experienced or ‘disremembered’ sense of time unhinged from ‘clock’ time. The opening sequence montages paradoxical imagery of a pristine re-built city, bodies of bombing victims, nuclear ash and the texture of a lover’s embrace. In another scene, as the heroine walks through Hiroshima at night, the French architecture associated with her dead German wartime lover’s memory returns to mix with the real, creating an ‘inexpressible’ (Susan Sontag 1986: 236) consciousness situated between metaphor and reality.

Cinema in this fourth modality repeats and freezes its subject to articulate trauma’s ‘paralysis, repetition, circularity’ (Kaplan 2001: 204). Kaplan’s further analysis of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a foundation work of American avant-garde cinema, as a trauma narrative (Kaplan 2005) is discussed at length in Chapter 4. For Joan Copjec such cinema’s self-reflexivity operates as a metaphor for self-awareness (Copjec 1988: 242). In shifting to issues of global feminism Kaplan sustains her non-narrative view stressing the flashback’s value for a trauma cinema:

> The struggle to figure trauma’s affects cinematically leads to means other than linearity or story: fragment, hallucinations, flashbacks are the modes trauma cinema characteristically adopts (Kaplan & Wang 2004: 204).

The fourth modality is similar to categories developed by other feminist writers working outside cinema. In *Survival*, a survey of the themes of Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood lays down four basic victim positions (Atwood 1972: 36). These are in ascending order of empowerment: deny you are a victim (1), you are a victim because of an act of fate (2), acknowledge you are a victim but refuse its inevitability (3) and be a creative non-victim (4). Kaplan’s witnessed autobiographic narrative is the articulation of the creative non-victim. Sherry Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation reinforces Kaplan’s categories, where at its most empowering ‘the have-nots can indeed improve their lot by handling the entire job of planning, policy-making and managing a program’ (Arnstein 1969: 223). This fourth position also suggests the self-actualised personality that sits atop Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs where ‘the clear emergence of these needs rests upon satisfaction of the physiological, safety, love and esteem needs’ (Maslow 1943: 383). Performance is essential at this fourth level for Maslow: ‘a musician must make music’ (Maslow 1943: 383).

The understanding that the path to empowerment leads to the creative non-victim underpins these hierarchies. Victims of trauma who travel this trajectory must re-structure a deep personal language. For Laub and Nanette Auerhahn recovery moves to empowerment from the dissociated fragment of affect to the integrated narrative of metaphor (Laub & Auerhahn 1993). Herman maps this restructure in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992): ‘when survivors recognise the origins of their psychological difficulties in an abusive childhood environment, they no longer need attribute them to an inherent defect in the self. Thus the way is opened to the creation of new meaning in experience and a new unstigmatized identity’ (Herman 1992: 127).

Kaplan’s view that cinema *performs* trauma is productive: ‘Forms such as cinema may be especially appropriate to figuring the visual, aural and non-linear fragmented phenomena of trauma- to performing it’ (Kaplan 2001: 204-5). Performance, more than representation, suggests an immediate and direct engagement with the whole body. Vivian Sobchack’s shift from psychoanalysis to existential phenomenology considers: ‘the body’s radical contribution to the constitution of the film experience’ (Sobchack 1992: 25) and avoids a ‘commodity fetishism’. In Chapter 5 I examine trauma’s performance in Breer’s films through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology rather than the psychoanalysis Kaplan employs.

The Flashback (Turim)

Turim’s contribution to the *Screen* dossier on flashbacks also uses a psychoanalytic framework, relating trauma to a Lacanian lack of being and a Freudian deep wound of the psyche (Turim 2001). This view utilizes Sigmund Freud’s views on both suppression in early childhood fantasy and war trauma’s splitting of the self. Turim enlists Caruth’s description of the traumatic flashback as an event of sudden return, repetition, and intrusive hallucination:

> Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed,

> uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth 1996: 11).

From the margins of this and Turim's earlier writing on the cinematic flashback and abstraction relationships are discernible between trauma, a 20s European avant-garde and new media. Turim's cinematic flashback disturbs narrative flow, signaling a trauma's return: 'Violently inserted flashbacks inscribe in narratives a shattering of complacency' (Turim 2001: 207). Turim observes: 'Though similar abrupt flashbacks mark 1920's avant-garde films, only in the post World War II period are they associated with the events of history and only then do they appear in films of mass distribution' (Turim 2001: 207) presenting *The Pawnbroker* (dir. Sidney Lumet, 1964) and *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) as representative of this shift. *The Pawnbroker* articulates the emptied and icy existence of a New York pawnbroker and Holocaust survivor. The Holocaust scenes appear in flashback in stylized form removed from the gritty immediacy of the New York street scenes and the Harlem underclass forming the film's milieu. I examine the 20s avant-garde nominated by Turim as a flashback form here in more detail later in this chapter which Susan McCabe describes as a Cubist cinema that 'foregrounds the fragmentary, incohesive character of human embodiment' (McCabe 2000: 68).

The avant-garde's non-linearity repeatedly surfaces in Turim's texts. In *Abstraction in Avant- garde Film* (Turim 1978) the avant-garde is characterised as challenging both classic and modernist narrative. Here Turim again sources Lacan's psychoanalysis, this time through Kristeva's 'revolution in poetic language' (Turim 1978: 2). In the 'Disjunction of the Modernist Flashback' (Turim 1989: 231-45) she identifies this 20s avant-garde as early cinematic modernism describing its practice as 'restoring some of the energy of dislocation and mimesis of thought and memory inherent in the flashback' (Turim 1989: 189). Turim focuses on the flashback as a device used within narrative demonstrating the functioning of the wounded psyche rather than as the independent aesthetic distinguishing 20s avant-garde films. Turim recognises the psyche is: 'often wounded or damaged either by war or by personal trauma' (Turim 1989: 190). For Turim the flashback functions 'to represent the mental processes to show the memory flashes and brief disjointed or distorted images which come to a character's mind' (Turim 1989: 190). When Turim writes that: 'Floating temporalities do not maintain the points of reference necessary to the flashback as a device' (Turim 1989: 246) she again measures the flashback in relation to narrative cinema. Yet it is exactly this lack of reference that marks the flashback's traumatic credentials, Turim's expression 'floating temporalities' recalling Elsaesser's 'recovered referentiality' (Elsaesser 2001: 201) and Felman and Laub's witnessing as a strategy for discerning testimony's gaps and hesitations (Felman & Laub 1992: xiv).

In her conclusion to *Flashbacks in Film* Turim speculates on avant-garde practice, questioning whether the flashback form has a place on its own terms as 'memory traces without the ordering structure of conscious recall or narrative association' (Turim 1989: 245). She points out that: 'Much of the diaristic work of the avant-garde, the personal film, can be seen as researching a kind of unframed flashback structure, revising the immediacy of narrative or documentary film in favor of the memory album' (Turim 1989: 246). This describes the films of Walker's 'trauma cinema' vanguard such as *Daughter Rite* and *The Ties that Bind*.

Turim's memory album evokes Manovich's notion of database. Manovich brandishes the 20s avant-garde film *Man With a Movie Camera* (dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929) as exemplar for new digital media: 'Vertov is able to achieve something that new media artists still have to learn- how to merge database and narrative into a new form' (Manovich 2001: 243). The action of Dziga Vertov's symphony of light and abstraction is organised around glossaries of theme and form rather than cause and effect. Movement and rhythm within the frame are critical. Framed body gesture and machine movement imply relationships between work and leisure. The camera, tripod, lens, eye, theatre and screen's intermittent appearances bring a level of self- reference to the viewing experience unavailable in melodrama. There is an editing precision, a virtuosity of technique, in bursts of short and sharp images forming a procession of fragmentary machine impressions, emblematic of the new modern industrial experience that test and train the eye.

Read through its gaps and hesitations Turim's commentary on cinematic flashbacks permits affinities between 20s avant-garde film and trauma, connects to Elsaesser's take on the digital media's traumatic architecture. Speculative connections are discernible to Walker's 'trauma cinema' and Manovich suggesting a further link between the 20s avant-garde and digital media practice. Through Turim's and Walker's psychoanalytic position there is a speculative connection available between feminism and a 20s European avant-garde whose nature and detail remains unclear. The historical events through which a 20s avant-garde cinema directly impacts 70s feminist counter-cinema are not articulated. Given the feminist influence on 'trauma cinema' and the clutch of evidence suggesting the importance of a 20s avant-garde in reproducing the visceral impact of the traumatic flashback in cinematic form this gap needs locating.

Lis Rhodes uses the pun on light's two meanings (the verbal ironically) to momentarily straddle this feminist-20s avant-garde gap in *Light Reading* (dir. Lis Rhodes, 1978). A spoken feminist text bookends a silent visual display of dancing letters and light, frozen moments of a look through a mirror, defaced altered stills repeat and churn, more fragmentary and dynamic but also more fluid than the syntax of Vertov's machine staccato, closer to the kinetic animation of Hans Richter and Man Ray. The read text gives voice to woman's experience: 'She objected / she refused to be framed / she raised her hand / she stopped the action / she began to read / she began to re-read aloud' (Extract from the soundtrack).

Just as Turim ends *Flashback in Film* with speculation about the flashback as a viable form of cinema in its own right, she ends *Abstraction in Avant-garde Films* with a situation where feminism and a 20s avant-garde influenced film combine and overlap metaphorically in a traumatic event of loss, mourning and rebirth (Turim 1978: 131). This scene from the narrative fiction *The Battle of Tokyo or The Man Who Left his Will on Film* (dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1970) is replete with the re-enactment and false authenticity with which Elsaesser marks digital media. Never-the-less Laub and Felman's witnessing can help locate the real events behind its fictional facade. In this scene an abstract avant-garde film is being projected. Turim explains: 'The images of the avant-garde film are criticized by the Leftists for not being readable as political discourse and they therefore find them to lack meaning and to be worthless trash' (Turim 1978: 131). One member of the political collective still watches the film. It is her dead lover's film. As she masturbates and the images project on her, she recites 'the trauma of her recent past, the departure of her lover on the day of his death' (Turim 1978: 131).

Avant-Garde Film, Left Politics and Feminism

> 'I keep wishing I could push time backwards' (Bernadette Protti in Sullivan 1985: 122)

In keeping with Foucault's archaeology of 'trying to detect the incidence of interruptions' (Foucault 1972: 4), this Chapter shifts gears here from trauma theory's introduction into screen studies to locating a gap in its assimilation. The challenge is to locate the historic moment or real event within the written texts of screen studies and avant-garde film barely evident metaphorically in *The Battle of Tokyo* (1970) and recounted at the conclusion of Turim's *Abstraction in Avant-garde Films* (1978). At best a 'trace of a trace of a trace' of a real event is performed, approaching Elsaesser's 'event without a trace' (Elsaesser 2001: 197). 80s and 90s feminist film practice's relation to 20s avant-garde is alluded to but remains unspoken. I examine this gap by jog-shuttling to the 70s, 'scene of the crime' in Oshima's parable, when leftist politics, avant-garde film and feminism are all in the room together. I identify materialist film as the missing link, whose commentators name it as successor to 20s avant-garde practice but which is, interestingly, strategically dismissed from the feminist project at this time. This revelation precipitates an analysis of materialist film assessing its ability to perform trauma, its pedigree for a 'trauma cinema' and detailing the circumstances of its dismissal. Feminist film theory's removal of materialist film is presented as the gap in the narrative of trauma and screen studies performed metaphorically in Turim's notation of Oshima's *The Battle of Tokyo*.

Artist made films enter public view to proliferate in the late 60s, facilitated by the availability of second hand 16mm film and sound equipment after the Second World War. Commentators on this work identify the 20s avant-garde cinema as technical and aesthetic precursors for the assemblage, collagic, graphic and abstract elements of new work predominately emerging out of filmmakers co-ops. Its most prominent critics, P. Adams Sitney, Annette Michelson, Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal, focus their attention on the formalist elements in the most challenging work. Mulvey and other cine-feminists, concurrently developing a new political feminist cinema, recognise formalism's critical potential: 'the answer clearly led towards formalism: foregrounding the process itself, privileging the signifier, necessarily disrupts aesthetic unity and forces the spectator's attention on the means of production of meaning' (Mulvey 1979: 7).

20s European avant-garde cinema

For Michelson the 20s European avant-garde provides a historic continuity into this contemporary form of experimental or avant-garde film:

> The entire tradition of the independently made film, from Deren and Anger through Brakhage, has been developed as an extension, in American terms, of an avant-gardist position of the twenties Europe, distending the continuity, negating the tension of narrative (Michelson 1976: 175-6).

The structure of David Curtis's book *Experimental Cinema a Fifty Year Evolution* (1971) demonstrates the same course, beginning with the European avant-garde and ending with the co-op movement. He underlines the importance of Hans Richter and Fernand Léger's work. *Rhythmus 21* (dir. Hans Richter, 1921) for initiating developments in kinetic studies to which Breer contributed and Léger's *Ballet Mechanique* (dir. Fernand Léger, 1924) as a precursor to developments 'towards the physical properties of film- the 'film as the (only) subject of film' school' (Curtis 1971: 155). He notes that Richter's wartime move to America personally linked the 20s European avant-garde to a new generation of independent film artists (Curtis 1971: 50). *Rhythmus 21*, the length of one roll of film, is constructed from simplified cut out squares of various sizes and shades of black, grey and white that expand, jump and disappear unexpectedly in tempo and rhythm. Its elementary kinetic play of light was appropriated in *Form Phases I* (dir. Robert Breer, 1952). Richter used a re-printing machine to hesitate, move forward and backward his initial animations: 'single images disappeared in the flow of images' (Hans Richter in Russett & Starr 1976: 53).

Like the flashback, *Ballet Mechanique's* repetitions, with its body and object close-ups, high contrast images and rapid edited sequences deny narrative. For McCabe this cinema approaches mutilation, as it 'reconceptualises the gestural body in time and space by both visceralizing and dissecting it' (McCabe 2000: 68). Steven Dwoskin locates the film's abstract form in its innovative editing strategies (Dwoskin 1975: 27). Léger's own rationale reads like a dissociative aesthetic of shell shock and war neurosis: 'the war had thrust me, as a soldier, into the heart of a mechanical atmosphere. In this atmosphere I discovered the beauty of the fragment' (quoted in Stauffacher 1947: 11). Is this fragment that same 'dissociative' base of traumatic memory that Janet identifies in the shell shock of war? As Van der Kolk observes:

> according to Janet traumatic memory may consists of images, sensations, affective states, and behaviours that are invariable (Van der Kolk 1996d: 296).

Man Ray's reduces this 'fragment' to an essential material level in his camera-less photographs, called rayographs or photograms, that Ray further embedded into his short films. Dwoskin highlights the importance of laboratory intervention to Ray's creative practice (Dwoskin 1975: 178). Tscherkassky explains: 'Man Ray placed various objects on raw film stock and exposed the shadows they cast' (Tscherkassky 2005: 158). In his Dadaist *Retour a la Raison* (dir. Man Ray, 1923) Ray spread salt and pepper and pins over strips of black and white film and then exposed the filmstrip to light. He added filmed night-time fairground lights, a dancing paper mobile and images of a nude model bathed in striped light. According to Edward Small 'Any hope for an audience to find a diegesis