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Trauma, Memory and Religion in Film

Editorial

On 29 October 2015, the Dutch research group *Moving Visions / Film and Religion* held a symposium entitled “Trauma, Memory and Religion in Film” at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. During this meeting, two films were screened and discussed: *THE ACT OF KILLING* (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO/ 2012) and *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* (Stefan Ruzowitzky, DE/AT 2013). The principal objective was to look for possible relationships between memory, trauma and religion in two completely different world regions, Indonesia and Europe, based on portrayals of these themes in the two films. These regions differ greatly not only in climate and landscape, but also in culture and religion. It seemed possible that by scrutinizing these differences we would encounter something universal, something common to all human beings. Yet we must be careful not to jump to conclusions. We hope this special issue will offer new analyses of, and thus new insight into, this topic.

During the preparation of this special issue we recognized that examination of Michael Haneke’s *DAS WEISSE BAND / THE WHITE RIBBON* (DE/AT/FR/IT 2009) would contribute to a comprehensive reflection on these themes. This volume therefore also presents an analysis of this film.

Before we introduce the articles to our readership, we provide a short reflection on what it means to screen trauma. We then take note of the approach followed by Haneke in his *The White Ribbon*, as it is different from the approaches employed in the other two films. Haneke’s movie does not explicitly deal with trauma. Our focus then turns to the role of religion in the three films discussed. Finally, we provide a short introduction to the four articles discussing these subjects.

SCREENING TRAUMA

How can we screen trauma? This question might lead the perception of documentary movies about atrocities in the 20th and 21st centuries, like *S21 THE KHMER ROUGE KILLING MACHINE* (Rithy Panh, CAMB/FR 2003) about Cambodia, *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* (Joshua Oppenheimer, ID/DK 2014) about Indonesia or *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* about Nazi-Europe. The first concern emerge as we watch mov-

ies on atrocities is whether these artistic representations perhaps guide the public away from what “really happened”. There certainly is a huge gap between, on the one hand, the immediate experience of the event that lies behind the interpretative screening and, on the other hand, watching the director’s material while neither part nor ever having been part of the event. Yet often filmic representations are not intended to show what happened; instead they present case studies to be explored in the present. Rity Panh, director of *S21*, argued in an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, that if we can’t distinguish between perpetrator and victim, it becomes impossible to mourn.¹ For Panh, his film is more than historic interpretation or a perspective on memory; it poses the broad question of how we think about perpetrators and victims in multiple contexts. In *S21* Panh shows how in post-genocide Cambodia perpetrators are confronted by one of their victims. The question of *why* they acted as they did is swiftly transformed into a question of *how* they did so. The confrontation is set in Tuol Sleng, a former high school in Pnhom Penh where torture was carried out during the Khmer Rouge regime. In films like *S21*, *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* and *THE ACT OF KILLING*, one question continually resounds for the audience: Is this what we are as human beings? What appears on the screen therefore challenges the audience with a moral question: what would you do? It is this question, heard in the present, that makes movies like *S21*, *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* and *THE ACT OF KILLING* so immediate. In a way they look to confront a public that might already know the language of human rights. Breaking through established idioms by portraying perpetrators in specific situations, sometimes with the perpetrators playing themselves as in *S21* and *THE ACT OF KILLING*, seems a missionary purpose for these directors. Indeed, their movies are hardly about a past; they establish a critical link between past and present and break through the dichotomic simplicity of good guys and bad guys.

But the questions raised by the movies are hardly open questions. Often the movies contain an inherent critique of genocidal violence and present humanistic perspectives on obedience. Mostly, these movies underline the humanity of the victims, seeking to give names, faces and biographies so that they are much more than just numbers.

According to historian Richard Bessel, since the Second World War remembering violence has largely been about remembering the victims of violence. Central to the commemoration of acts of violence, he continues, is a sense of empathy, of identification with the victims.² This framing emphasizes a duality of innocent victim and evil, or at least ignorant, perpetrator. A new perspective has also unfolded, especially since Vietnam War veterans in the United States

1 Oppenheimer 2012, 255.

2 Bessel 2015, 244.

have been regarded, according to Derek Summerfield, “not as perpetrators and offenders but as people traumatized by roles thrust on them by the US military”.³ For Summerfield the recognition that traumatic war experiences could cause PTSD legitimized the victimhood of the soldier, and as a result, perpetrators too could identify as, and be seen as, victims.

VIOLENCE IN MOVIES

Can movies present violence? Where the goal of violence is often to claim retaliation, vengeance or power, the goal of movie-making is often to provide information, as in documentary films, or entertainment. Sometimes films play an important role in the construction of memory. The portrayal of the Second World War in films like *SCHINDLER’S LIST* (Steven Spielberg, USA 1993), *SOPHIE’S CHOICE* (Alan J. Pakula, USA 1983) or *SARA’S KEY* (Gilles Paquet-Brenner, USA 2010) has contributed significantly to the visual memories of post-war (American) generations. According to microsociologist Randall Collins, who has carried out extensive research into the escalation of violence in public spaces, violence is not committed easily. Contrary to the message given by entertainment movies that suggest that violence is somehow natural or uncomplicated, “real” violence is disturbing, fear arousing and destabilizing.⁴ We might wonder if cinematic violence has anything to do with real violence. Bessel has observed that contemporary commercial entertainment is saturated with staged violence, and he argues that there is a huge difference between a real death and a staged killing.⁵ Because many directors see their work as a form of “question” towards their public, the challenge for them is how to bridge the gap between a real death and a staged killing. In other words, the director, and the audience too, must consider how documentary movies like *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* or *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* can implicitly refer to real death by staging death.

TRAUMA CULTURE

Movies contribute to how a past is remembered in the present and to what past is remembered. Pictures, narratives and impressions all co-construct (popular) memory. In this sense, memory can also function as a strategy to “re-member” an individual into a group, with memory reshuffled, remodelled and re-accommodated in light of the discourses and material culture (pictures, movies, social media, buildings, places) of the present group to which the individual wishes to

3 Summerfield 2001, 95.

4 Collins 2008, 10–19.

5 Bessel 2015, 35.

belong. The social context in which we remember determines which elements in our narrative of re-membrance provide us with that recognition.⁶ Social recognition is an important element of remembrance. As Jan Assmann argues, the “wish to belong” is present in every memory.⁷ In this sense, to remember always serves the present. How do these memories then determine what we perceive as important elements of the past and how are these memories related to the topics formative for the groups we belong to? Making a film about the past is always about the present.

In 1978 Mark Snyder and Seymour W. Uranowitz published an article that addressed the memory of past events from a cognitive perspective. They argued that a person’s current beliefs reconstruct that person’s memory. Information is never fixed in a person’s memory but instead is repeatedly and actively reconstructed. We do not remember events, they suggested, “by activating or ‘replaying’ some fixed memory trace. Rather, we construct a schematic representation of our past experience by piecing together remembered bits and pieces with new facts that we (knowingly or unknowingly) supply to flesh out or augment our emerging knowledge of the past.”⁸ Conducting research with this thesis in mind, the authors witnessed how stereotypes provided after an event could nudge people to recall information that was predominantly consistent with that stereotype. Despite some criticism, the research was repeated by many others, and the evidence grew that people who after an event were given information that contained a stereotype about the event adapted their memories to the subsequently provided stereotype.⁹ Memory, so it seems, is modified by “current” information. Ap Dijksterhuis showed that an a posteriori stereotype renders the memory of information about an event inaccessible if the information contradicts the stereotype, but information that suits the stereotype is rendered accessible.¹⁰ Stereotypes have an impact on what we remember in that they ensure we selectively recollect information about events. Film-making deals with present stereotypes as current frames for a past that might have been discarded. However, whereas “entertainment” provides the simple stereotype duality of perpetrator and victim, often evoking feelings that vengeance is just, documentary movies like *S21*, *THE ACT OF KILLING* and *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* present a more complex characterization. Oppenheimer for example has explicitly argued in several interviews that for him *THE ACT OF KILLING* is about

6 As documented by the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski and his work *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1996; German ed., 1995). In his book Wilkomirski depicted cruel events he had witnessed as a child during the Holocaust. After publication of the award-winning book, Wilkomirski’s memories were identified as invented. See Wilkomirski/Mächler 2001.

7 Assmann 2006, 4.

8 Snyder and Uranowitz 1978, 942.

9 Dijksterhuis 1996, 4–5.

10 Dijksterhuis 1996, 12.

the question of who we really are, an approach that avoids that stereotypical duality of perpetrator and victim.

There remains, however, a tension in how, what and why atrocities are remembered in a specific context, whether in films, literature or political, academic or religious discourse. Victims' memories of cruelty in contexts where this cruelty is not recognized as such but instead profiled as necessary or even glorified as heroic are often silenced or suppressed; they may deform memory and/or lead to traumatic disorders, as was the case for victims of the Cultural Revolution in the Chinese context, victims of the communist hunt in Indonesia during the reign of Suharto, and victims of the expulsion of Germans from the East in post-war Europe. Perpetrators' memories of cruelty in contexts where these perpetrators are deemed to have been on the wrong side of history can also lead to suppression, silencing and traumatic disorders. Being a victim in a context where narratives of victimization are dominant brings acknowledgment, and being a perpetrator in a context where narratives of heroism frame past atrocities can similarly generate social acknowledgement. Being a victim in a context where victimhood is not acknowledged or where victims are seen as having brought the persecution upon themselves can lead to silencing and to the suppression of memories. But in all cases, the context stipulates how victims and perpetrators remember what happened. What there is to tell depends on what has been told, believed and framed as part of cultural, political and religious representations and discursive traditions.

This tension between what is remembered and how the past is represented in political and cultural discourses comes strongly to the fore in *S21, THE ACT OF KILLING* and *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*. These movies can be understood as attempts to articulate certain trajectories of what Assmann calls "cultural memory". Assmann distinguishes between collective memory and cultural memory: where collective memory is related to the dominant view of a group on a past that it claims as its own past, cultural memory contains a chaotic archive of documents that are not necessarily so well remembered, with material that might be discarded, neglected or contested at the point where the group "remembers", as for example in the case of Dutch colonial history in Indonesia or conquest by settlers in North America. Assmann understands collective memory as bonding and cultural memory as containing also the non-instrumentizable, heretical, subversive and disowned.¹¹ Cultural memory involves, so to say, at the same time the uncanny of the past and the familiar, yet incongruous with the group's self-understanding. An interesting example of the difference between collective memory, as stipulation, and cultural memory is found in how the atrocities of 1965 and 1966 are "remembered" in Indonesia and how they are screened in Oppenheimer's movies *THE GLOBALIZATION TAPES*, *THE ACT OF KILLING* and *THE*

11 Assmann 2006, 27.

LOOK OF SILENCE. The killings are retold in the discursive style of collective memory but precisely this approach evokes the uncanny of cultural memory.

OTHER APPROACHES

In his film *THE WHITE RIBBON*, Michael Haneke has chosen to approach the origins of violence performed by Germans in the First and Second World Wars from a specific perspective. He takes his audience to a communal setting in the north of Germany on the eve of the First World War. His focus is on the generation of Germans who would “later” commit atrocities. He emphasizes childhood, for childhood is important, even decisive, for later behaviour. Haneke chose a village setting for his movie because at the start of the 20th century most Germans lived in villages. His film is in black and white, indicating that the narrative is about the past. He portrays the villagers of this period living in a hierarchical context in which some prominent citizens, such as the baron, minister, doctor and schoolteacher, set the course. The film shows a series of incidents, accidents and atrocities, cruel situations that seem to have been initiated by a group of village children, although who is in fact responsible remains unclear. Moreover, the initiators of the attacks go unpunished. That point is made even more strongly when, at the climactic moment, with one or two of his children under strong suspicion, the minister refrains from punishing them, even though he conducts a veritable reign of terror over his children. There is discipline, but at the same time there is disorder and injustice. The discipline claims to be just, yet injustice prevails, or more importantly even, insecurity dominates. Given the prominent role of the minister and his children, the church, or religion, is part of this system. In spite of the weekly sermons given by the minister, which are not screened, religion is not able to halt injustice in the village. Remarkably, the only sermon that is depicted is given by the baron. Is Haneke’s message that religion is powerless in the face of the atrocities of war? Or is the role of religion ambiguous? The film also poses another stimulating question: did the perpetrators subsequently act violently because of their earlier traumatic experiences, the traumas they had lived in their childhoods? Certainly, Haneke’s film is an interesting effort to understand perpetration as more than individual’s choice.

RELIGION

In all three films, the human experiences discussed in this special issue in some way relate to a religious worldview. *THE WHITE RIBBON* reflects a culture in which Protestantism prevails. In *THE ACT OF KILLING* we are confronted with a world in which the main protagonist is afraid of the ghosts of the dead. He asks if he has sinned, and he explicitly states that he fears the judgment of God at the end of

the world (02:03:11–02:05:12). In *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* religion is rather more in the background, but it is not completely absent. Although religion is not addressed directly, the unease and guilt the soldiers feel have religious connotations. Lutheranism, for example, is about guilt and about wrestling to be released from this guilt. Although religion is not always and everywhere present, these films and their analysis in the contributions to this volume certainly articulate religious trajectories.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

In the first article Lucien van Lier analyses *THE ACT OF KILLING*. In his examination he shows director Joshua Oppenheimer's individualistic approach to movie-making. Filmmaking is for Oppenheimer a therapeutic process, for he searches for answers to questions about humanness, responsibility and authenticity. Through this quest he hopes to encounter a deeper layer within human beings, a humanity that all humans have in common. But this approach has roots in a Western view of life and in what making a good movie requires. In the end van Lier considers whether Oppenheimer was in fact successful with this approach.

The second article, by Hessel Zondag, interrogates the approach used in *THE ACT OF KILLING* and *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE*. The former film is about trauma, the latter about conformity. These perspectives are applied to the actions of the perpetrators and reveal what occurs before the killing and what the consequences of that killing are. They claim to elucidate what changes men into mass murderers and what their participation in mass killing can mean for the rest of their lives. Yet these perspectives also conceal certain crucial issues.

Gerwin van der Pol is the author of the third contribution, the article about *THE WHITE RIBBON*. He seeks to show that Haneke tried to put his finger on the motives of people who committed atrocities in the Second World War by going back to the situation and society of their youth. In this earlier context, too, atrocities happened. How did the adults, in particular, deal with such barbarism? And what role did religion play in these circumstances?

In the fourth article, Freek L. Bakker compares *THE ACT OF KILLING* and *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* by means of close reading and analysis of what is shown in these two movies, in particular when women and children are involved. The regional, religious, political and military contexts of the two films differ widely, yet in both instances the perpetrators buckle when women and children are victims of their actions. How can we explain what is happening here? Through analysis that draws on the thought of Zygmunt Bauman and Emmanuel Levinas, Bakker seeks deeper insight into what takes place in these films, and perhaps also in the real world.

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