Trauma Studies in the Digital Age

Workshop report

by

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Day 1

The workshop opened with a welcoming speech by Dr. **Anna Menyhért** (University of Amsterdam), who greeted the workshop's participants and audience. In her greetings, Dr. Menyhért emphasized the importance of the growing field of trauma studies and pointed to the necessity of revisiting it in the context of contemporary digital realities. Then, she introduced two speakers for the roundtable "Trauma Studies in the Digital Age": **Chaja Polak**, a Dutch writer and artist, and **Arnoud Arps**, a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam. In the course of the stimulating discussion moderated by Menyhért, the roundtable participants commented on historical trauma and its long-term impact, discussed current trends and methods in trauma treatment, and problematized relations between trauma and colonization as well as memories of violence. The discussion was followed by a Q/A session, during which speakers reflected on the impact of stereotypes on trauma processing, the ethical aspects of different forms of artistic representation of trauma, and the role of collective guilt in dealing with trauma.

Day 2

The second day of the workshop started with the opening words by Prof. Dr. **Ellen Rutten** (University of Amsterdam). During her speech, Prof. Dr. Rutten welcomed the workshop's participants to the workshop venue in NIAS and emphasized the importance of re-assessment of the field of trauma studies in the light of the current advent of digital technologies. This introduction was followed by the word of thanks to workshop organizers, Dr. **Anna Menyhért** (University of Amsterdam), **Mykola Makhortykh** (University of Amsterdam), and **Michelle de Wit** (University of Amsterdam).

The first session of the workshop was chaired by Prof. Dr. **Ellen Rutten** and investigated interconnections between trauma, digital technology, and migration/exile. The session was opened by Dr. **Koen Leurs** (University of Utrecht), who discussed the use of smartphones as personal archives by young forced migrants – particularly young Syrians – coming to the Netherlands. Drawing on on-going in-depth interviews, digital ethnography and participatory research, Dr. **Leurs** investigated the ways in which smart phones are operationalized as personal pocket archives and the importance of these archives for migrants. It then was followed by the talk of **Nour Munawar** (University of Amsterdam), who proposed a multi-layered strategy of media use for post-war heritage reconstruction with special focus on the cases of Syria and Iraq. In his talk, **Munawar** emphasized that social media can be used not only to trace individual voices in relation to the heritage of war, but also that it can be employed as a means of sustainable public archaeology among the global community of traumatized locals in exile. The panel was concluded by Dr. **Anna Menyhért** (University of Amsterdam), who provided a complex overview of the ways in which Hungarian migrants use social media to communicate the transcultural trauma of migration. Using a large set of observations from online communities of migrants, Dr. **Menyhért** offered a sophisticated reading of metaphors of alienation and exile used to talk about

trauma in the digital environment.

The second panel was chaired by **Prof. Dr. Yra van Dijk** (University of Leiden) and focusing on memory/trauma transmissions across media and generations. In the first talk of the panel, Dr. **Orsolya Rákai** (University of Vienna) offered a critical view of the ways in which traumas related to family violence are dealt with on social media in the Hungarian context. While doing so, Dr. **Rákai** problematized the use of digital technology for processing trauma by pointing to the potential limits of virtual communities in dealing with personal traumatic experiences which are deeply rooted in social, institutional, symbolic and ideological structures. In the second presentation, **Réka Deim** (University of Amsterdam) discussed the conflicting memories of the Communist period in Hungary and how these memories interact with present-day traumas. In particular, **Deim** focused on the effect of the memory of collaboration with the communist regime on subsequent generations by analyzing life-story narratives of former informants and their children.

The third panel chaired by the Dr. **Orsolya Rákai** (University of Vienna) examined the role of trauma in the context of contemporary conflicts. The panel was opened by **Koen Kluessien** (independent scholar), who discussed the perspectives of using technology for preventing mass atrocities in the age of digital humanitarianism. **Kluessien** provided an overview of several non-governmental projects, varying from the use satellite imagery to document atrocities to the employment of mobile phone applications that retrieve, manage, and map data related to violation of human rights. It was then followed by a talk by Dr. **Vlad Strukov** (University of Leeds), who explored complex interactions between sexuality and social media in the Russian context by scrutinizing the concept of digital coming-out. By exploring how members of a few online communities use social media to construct their sexual identities and deal with traumatic experiences, Dr. **Strukov** demonstrated how traumas associated with digital coming-out are translated into activism and social awareness. The panel was concluded by the presentation of Dr. **Lisa Gaufman** (University of Bremen), who drew connections between the Ukrainian crisis and the WWII post-traumatic stress disorder in Russia. Dr. **Gaufman** examined social network rhetoric pertaining to the Ukraine crisis in 2014-2015, paying special attention to World War II references that were used for conceptualizng the Second World War as traumatic unifying event in Russia.

The next panel on trauma and digital monuments was chaired by **Laura Boerhout** (University of Amsterdam). The panel was opened by Dr. **Marielle Wijermars** (University of Helsinki), who looked at the Russian online project "1917 - Free History," which allows its visitors to relive the Russian revolution of 1917 in real time. Dr. **Wijermars** explored how the social media feed format and the interactivity it promotes affect societal and individual processes of coming to terms with the revolution's traumatic impact, as well as with the tensions characterizing Russian society today. It was followed by the talk of **Annelieke de Natris** (University of Amsterdam), who discussed the remembrance of the Great Ukrainian Famine – or Holodomor – in offline and online environments

outside Ukraine. **De Natris** examined how digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter influence the collective processing of the Holodomor and the recognition of a certain definition of this trauma. Finally, Dr. **Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier** (Erasmus University Rotterdam) examined the use of Kickstater for crowdfunding memorials. Dr. **Benzaquen-Gautier** analyzed a number of Kickstater campaigns related to memorial projects and discussed the visual and discursive arguments used by the campaigners, the interaction of project carriers and the backers, and the actual outcome of the campaigns.

The fifth panel was chaired by **Prof. Dr. Yra van Dijk** (University of Leiden) and examined the intersections between digital trauma and literature. In her presentation, Dr. **Gwen le Cor** (University Paris 8) discussed different ways of constructing trauma narratives in electronic literature. In particular, le Cor focused on two specific figures found in digital narratives – fragments and glitches – and how these figures allow electronic works to step out of narrative time to display a form of traumatic time. In the second talk of the panel Dr. **Silvana Mandolessi** (University of Leuven) examined the use of a personal blog as a means of coping with trauma in post-dictatorship Argentina. Dr. **Mandolessi** questioned to what extent the deconstructive, post-structuralist, or textualist guise of trauma theory works in the current digital scenario and the cultural practices it promotes.

The last panel of the second day investigated the matters of digital trauma cultures and was chaired by Prof. Dr. **Paul Arthur** (Western Sydney University). In the first talk of the panel, Dr. **Melissa Kerr Chiovenda** (Harvard University) discussed the use of social media in the context of cultural trauma of ethnic Hazara in Afghanistan. In the course of the presentation Dr. **Kerr Chiovenda** explained how cultural trauma is promoted by Hazara activists through social media and how it contributes to a "culture of trauma" among many Hazaras. The second presentation by Dr. **Shruti Devgan** (College of William and Mary) examined the use of digital technology for the preservence and transmittance of traumatic memories of anti-Sikh violence in India in the 1980s. Finally, the presentation by **John Hanna** (University of Amsterdam) focused on Facebook groups dedicated to the Lebanese Civil War and the use of social media data for mapping the conflict

Day 3

The **third day** of the workshop opened with a panel chaired by Dr. **Anna Menyhért** (University of Amsterdam). The panel, which continued the exploration of the notion of digital monuments, started with a talk by Prof. Dr. **Paul Arthur** (Western Sydney University) who discussed the growing dissemination of online memorial sites. Based on his reading of virtual memorials, Prof. Dr. **Arthur** argued that online places of remembrance allow a dynamic to be created whereby extreme expressions of intimate testimony or reflection can be shared in a largely public space. In the presentation that followed Dr. **Laurie Faro** (Tilburg University) offered a critical assessment of the 2005 digital

monument to the Jewish community of the Netherlands. Dr. **Faro** argued that monuments similar to the one examined can have a healing effect by allowing for self-expression in public virtual environments. Finally, **Elena Zezlina** (University of Cambridge) looked at the digital representation of the Risiera di San Sabba concentration camp in Italy. By examining the virtual reconstruction of the camp by a group of photographers and civil society organizations, **Zezlina** discussed and problematized the extent to which it allowed to provide alternative, community-led versions of the traumatic past.

The next panel was chaired by **Mykola Makhortykh** (University of Amsterdam) and investigated relations between trauma and digital archives. The first talk of the panel by **Courtney Cole** (Ohio University) was focused on digital collections of personal testimonies related to the work of South African, Sierra Leonean, and Liberian Truth Commissions. Cole examined what it means to archive and publicize someone else's traumatic story of violence, in the context of truth commissions, asking what kind of advantages and drawbacks this way of transmitting trauma digitally has. In the second talk **Angela Boone** (independent scholar) discussed the public memory of the deportation of German Jews from the Netherlands between 1945 and 1950. **Boone** examined the fear of digitization that is still present in archives and how it can affect the processing of collective trauma. Finally, the last talk of the panel by **Gernot Howanitz** (University of Passau) and **Erik Radisch** University of Passau/University of Bochum) examined the use of quantitative technique of distant watching for the processing of non-textual digital media. Using a state-of-art SIFT algorithm, **Howanitz** and **Radisch** offered a sophisticated analysis of the symbolic framing of a traumatic figure of Stepan Bandera from a diachronic point of view.

The ninth panel examined trauma storytelling in digital environments and was chaired by Dr. **Katalin Bálint** (University of Tilburg). The first presentation by **Natalia Sanchez-Querubin** (University of Amsterdam) used the concept of wounded-healers to explore Instagram blogs run by mothers whose children are disabled. Based on the examination of health-storytelling on Instagram, **Sanchez-Querubin** argued that social media platforms make recovering and healing into social activities and serve as a valuable medium for the pedagogy of suffering. The second talk by **Jenna Altomonte** (Ohio University) examined two digital projects created by Joseph Delappe: dead-in-irag from 2006 and iraqimemorial.org from 2007. By investigating how both projects were used for protest, commemoration, and memorialization, **Altomonte** problematized the use of digital edifice for informing the public about the violent aftereffects of modern warfare. Finally, **Lora Nouk** (independent artist) in her stimulating presentation/performance talked about the vulnerability and brokenness of the web. Using examples from her own online art practice, Nouk contoured the "trauma monster" and discussed digital vulnerability and the secretion of the uncanny online.

The last panel focused on digital testimonies of Holocaust and was chaired by Dr. **Angela**

Schwarz (University of Siegen). The panel started with a talk by **Mykola Makhortykh** (University of Amsterdam), who discussed the representation of the iconic episode of the Holocaust – the Babi Yar massacres – in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. **Makhortykh** examined Wikipedia entries for the massacres in different languages and analyzed how various versions of the encyclopedia approached the processing of this collective trauma. Makhortykh was followed by a talk by Dr. **Aleksandra Szczepan** (Jagiellonian University) who provided an overview of a project focused on collecting video testimonies of Holocaust bystanders in Poland. By analyzing how bystanders performatively engage themselves visiting the places of slaughter and reenact the scenes of the events, Dr. **Szczepan** asked if bystander testimonies can shed a new light on the established genre of Holocaust video testimonies. The panel was concluded with the presentation of **Maria Zalewska** (University of Southern California), who discussed the epistemology and ethics of using digital technology at the Holocaust sites. In doing so, **Zalewska** examined several case studies, including Instagram selfies from Auschwitz and the 'Yolocaust' project by Shahak Shapira, and questioned the relationship between social media outlets as transnational media and modes of memory expression.

The workshop concluded with the closing remarks of Dr. **Angela Schwarz** (University of Siegen) and Dr. **Anna Menyhért** (University of Amsterdam). Dr. **Schwarz** emphasized the importance of cross-disciplinary research on trauma and the necessity of critical assessment of the notion of trauma in the digital context. Then, Dr. **Menyhért** pointed out the significance of the workshop's contribution to the developing field of digital trauma studies and wished participants to continue their productive work in the field of research on digital trauma processing. The workshop ended with participants expressing gratitude to the organizing team for their excellent work in planning and organizing the workshop.