PART VII

After Conflict
War destabilises society, shatters national infrastructure and emotionally scars its involved parties. The impact of war and other types of armed conflict goes beyond the realm of physical harm into different aspects of the social life. Not only are conflicts themselves wholly traumatic periods in the history of nations, they are also the catalyst for many individual and collective traumas. This chapter is interested in the afterlife of such conflicts and it explores these issues by looking at the wounds opened up by war and the mechanisms of mourning, processing and ritualistic remembering stemming forth post-conflict. More specifically, we investigate how such traumas are represented in cinema and how these films can contribute to transnational discourses of remembrance. Whether didactically, politically or commercially motivated, in representing trauma histories, films co-constitutively interact with a wide space of memory and they are powerful tools for the invention, documentation and crystallisation of conflict. Departing from the perspective of memory studies, this chapter considers film to be a locus for storing and communicating such traumatic histories. While films dealing with conflict-related trauma do mostly tackle individual traumatic experiences – and often trauma is conceptualised through a psychoanalytical framework that highly favours the individual level – the events undergone always relate to the collective (see Ashuri 2010). Being a form of mass-media communication distributed transnationally,
cinema has powerful symbolic potential in establishing cultural identities and a belief in certain rules of law (Everett 2009). Although taking certain cinematic representations and stylistic strategies as starting points in our discussion, we shy away from employing a media-centric textual perspective. Rather, we are concerned with how this amorphous body of conflict and trauma films can be understood as part of broader (collective) practices of remembering and dealing with trauma. As such, our perspective is informed by the practice approach in media sociology (Couldry 2004), and more broadly the interest in media practices shared by media anthropologists (Igreja 2015; Pedelty 1995; Postill 2010). As this volume aims to take an anthropologically informed practice approach to the terrain of media and conflict relations, we specifically want to address how this plays out in relation to cinema.

Furthermore, since the films under scrutiny base themselves on contexts of conflict, some still being waged, they can have wider implications for how parties, nations or ethnic groups are perceived as victims and perpetrators of atrocities. Therefore, we adopt media anthropological notions of collective memory that relate to how such media representation can contribute to different forms of remembering and help shape new collective identities in postcrisis periods. Special attention should also be paid to how these representations enter within a wider transcultural space of production structures and audience practices. In that respect, we are sensitive to the representation of trauma in the context of specific textual codes and sociocultural contexts (see also Sumiala, Tikka and Valaskivi, as well as Markham, this volume). In doing so, we tackle ‘trauma cinema’ both transnationally and across genres. The arguments we present are structured in three main parts. First, we will theorise cultural trauma within global cinema in relation to memory and ideology. This positioning is followed by outlining the types of trauma representation and the debates currently dominant within trauma theory. We conclude with a critical suggestion of how trauma cinema, as a category of films and as a field of study, can evolve in perceiving these films as a tool of remembrance and reparation in post-conflict societies.

Trauma Theory and Collective Memory

Conceptualising trauma as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’, Caruth (1995: 11) considers
trauma as stemming from the dynamics of the event and the witness. Unable to forget or cognitively place the atrocities lived, the witnesses cannot fully assimilate the experience and are forced to experience it belatedly. Because the traumatic event cannot be experienced fully, a compulsion is felt to revisit the trauma, to represent it as it were. Trauma victims are forced to relive the experiences they underwent and do so in a manner that is prone to distortions and emotional reinterpretations. While trauma was initially understood as an inherently individual experience, it can also carry across individuals and be conceived as something collective; entwined with wider social groups or national identities (Assman 2006: 210–11). Amongst others, LaCapra (2014: 78) writes of ‘historical trauma’, theorising trauma as manmade historical atrocities such as conflicts, genocides and oppression with a lasting impact on the identity of both individuals and communities. Trauma seems to be contagious (Crownshaw 2013: 170): it cannot be fixed or contained to one location, but rather spreads through the likes of language and representation. This is why, according to Kaplan (2005), focusing on the relationship between trauma and media is important. In reproducing discourse and public reflections, mass-media representations of trauma have implications as to what is understood as traumatic collectively and how these events fit within a wider historical framework. As such, representation contributes to how a collective defines itself as ‘injured’ or ‘traumatised’. Or, in the words of Meek (2011: 34): ‘Whenever we hear the phrase “traumatic event” we need to ask: for whom is the event traumatic? If we assume events and their representations are not traumatic in themselves, we need to critically examine the role media plays in reproducing traumatic effects and traumatic structures of memory and forgetting.’

Alexander (2004: 7–8) takes this mediation argument further and states that events in themselves are never traumatic, but that trauma can be considered mostly a ‘socially mediated attribution’. This of course does not mean that he believes such traumas to be stemming from nonexistent events; he simply points out the ‘imagined’ dimension to trauma, in the sense that what is being referenced to as traumatic can be easily distorted, exaggerated and, in some cases, completely fabricated. To Alexander (2004: 1), cultural trauma occurs ‘when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways’. Collective trauma is thus very much in line with Bal’s (1999) conception of cultural memory. Bal (1999: viii) understands memory as the ‘product of collective agency rather than
the result of psychic or historic accident’. Assmann and Czaplicka’s (1995) writings investigate how the institutionalised formation of collective memories contributes to a kind of historical canon. How meaning and memory are constructed from such a historic event therefore becomes a struggle of meaning, a ‘trauma process’ (Alexander 2004: 27) in which discourses on the self and the other are solidified through collective representation. The implications of this trauma process are many-sided. Not only do they aid in the remembrance and general acknowledgement of the events, but under the symbolic marker of ‘trauma’, they memorialise such events (Blake 2008: 3). To an extreme extent, such commemoration can lead to an aura of afterthought that understands remembering as a moral demand. Besides such sentiments, conceptions of historical trauma can easily function as signifiers for collective identity, such as nation states, ethnic groups and religious communities (Meek 2011: 1). These markers in the history of the nation have wider consequences and can lie in the self/enemy/victim structure attributed to the events. In representing such series of events, moral judgement is often made and perpetrators identified. Moreover, these historical passages are commemorated and imbued with cultural significance. The commemoration of national trauma provides a powerful and ideologically stable frame of reference for the nation, aiding in the construction of collectives. This chapter is particularly interested in how such frames relate to structures of exclusion and enemy-making, since the collective identity stemming from such types of trauma work is often achieved at the expensive of an enemy perpetrator. Film is but one of many sites through which such traumas are socially mediated, and have the possibility to reproduce or resist a dominant reading of events as traumatic.

**Tackling Trauma on Screen**

As a shared conceptual space, cinema is a powerful tool in sustaining or disrupting reflections of, and about, the past (Bronfen 2012: 2). Through narrativised accounts of events, cinema gives collectives a way to address the traumas haunting them. Not only do films serve as mnemonic aids in processes of commemoration and trauma construction; film narratives can also be considered a form of memory in their own right (Landsberg 2004). Furthermore, being products of popular entertainment and mass media, such narrativised accounts of conflict enter a wider intertextual environment and interact with other forms of war framing. Pedelty (1995: 22), for example, uses the example of
Salvador (1986) as an illustration of how films can be an interpretative framework for conflict reporters and American audiences alike. By using an America photojournalist as a point of view to represent the Salvadoran Civil War, Salvador encouraged audiences not only to reflect on the violent events that were taking place, but also on how American news framing offered a biased perception of the conflict. By considering cinema as a site of memory, we are particularly interested in how traumatic histories of conflict are established, sustained, subverted and reinterpreted within the medium. Typologies of the representation of trauma in cinema might be divided in a reworking of conflict-related trauma as: (a) backstory; (b) subject matter; and (c) aesthetic. These suggested categories can be seen as part of what Erll (2008: 285) describes as ‘intra-medial strategies’ in the making of memory: ‘modes of representation which may elicit different modes of cultural remembering in the audience’ (2008: 290). Each in their own manner, films belonging to this tripartite try to formally engage the spectator in a position of vicarious witnessing.

The first category relates to how film-makers tap into traumatic histories as a way to flesh out the film’s characters and establish motivation. Trauma as backstory is in line with so-called ‘backstory wounds’ (Elm, Köhne and Kabalek 2014: 5), in which individual trauma is translated into the narrative unit of the flashback. Such traumas are often hegemonomically acknowledged as ‘historical traumas’ by the intended audiences and film-makers engage with these historical passages because of their dramatic power. In the Hollywood superhero film X-Men: First Class (2011), for example, Magneto, one of the story’s protagonists, has lived through the trials and tortures of Auschwitz. This event is referenced to by way of flashbacks and serves no particular point other than to establish the antagonistic relationship between Magneto and the story’s chief villain Shaw, who was the camp doctor responsible for his hellish childhood. Adapted from American comic books, this part of the character’s backstory is based within this historical passage not out of a will to inform an audience about the atrocities of the Holocaust, but because the genocide works as a powerful historical referent, efficiently delivering dramatic set-ups and affective tensions.

The second category of films is didactically motivated since they often stem from the will of the film-maker to inform the public and (re)tell traumatic narratives. As Terry George, director of Hotel Rwanda (2004), says: ‘I’m not trying to blow a trumpet for Hotel Rwanda, but I don’t think people had a sense of it until the movie came out, particularly in the United States where the film had a big impact’ (Fleming 2016). Other examples of this category of movies are Schindler’s List
These examples can be subtle or exploitative, politically motivated or commercially oriented. However, they all affectively link the spectator to a protagonist who undergoes a traumatic passage. One way in which films on conflict often attempt to make claim for authenticity is through their opening credits (Pötzsch 2012: 313).

The third category relates to conflict-related trauma as aesthetics. A considerable amount of literature on post-conflict trauma in cinema has focused on this category, which supposes a conception of trauma cinema as an entirely different form of film. Walker (2005: 19) writes on the genre of ‘trauma cinema’ as a category of (documentary) films that reject a realist mode and attempt to subvert the dominant narrative and aesthetic discourses within cinema through strategies of disruption and fragmentation. Alain Resnais was one of the first directors to investigate the dubious relationship between trauma and remembrance in films such as *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959). Building on modernist stylistic strategies of disturbance and fragmentation, Resnais contributed to a form of trauma representation that not only tackles the traumatic events lingering in our collective memory, but first and foremost provides a critical reflection of our relation to such traumatic remembrance. Such representations go beyond establishing an event or series thereof as a period of historical trauma, and question the authenticity of the structures of memory. In many ways, this is similar to Hirsch’s (2002: 142) concept of ‘posttraumatic cinema’ as a kind of film defined ‘by the attempt to discover a form for presenting that content that mimics some aspect of post traumatic consciousness itself’.

While we have to be critical towards considering Western modernist reflexes and avant-garde traditions as a superior type of trauma representation, this final type provides the most interesting examples when adopting the viewpoint of media anthropology. By refusing the notion of an authoritative retelling of events and embracing the gaps and distortions that characterise processes of remembrance, a type of self-reflective trauma work is undertaken. Many film-makers have continued this project and, as documentary films such as *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) show, film-makers keep finding new ways to involve spectators in precarious relations of witnessing. For example, by departing from dreams and inconclusive instances of remembrance, instead of the events themselves in his recovery of memory of the Sabra and Shatila massacre (the 1982 killing of Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites in a refugee camp by a Christian Lebanese militia under the eyes of their Israeli allies), its director Ari Folman refuses the illusion of total recall.
In offering a traumatic remembering characterised by subjectivity and incompleteness, our position as vicarious witness is problematised, therefore contributing to a more ambiguous treatment to our relation of the past and position as makers of memory and meaning. Films such as *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Missing Picture* (2013) also stress the indeterminateness of remembrance by involving perpetrator and victim in performances of mediation and remediation. In *The Act of Killing* (2012), for example, militia that aided in the Indonesian mass killings (in 1965–66) are asked to fictionally stage their own actions by way of acting and directing a film on the events. As such, it demonstrated how these war criminals have narrativised the genocide and how generic and formal codes of cinema are brought into negotiation with the mechanics of remembering. These strategies organise the likes of history and personal experiences in ways that do not dictate a specific narrative, but rather create a liminal space for the interaction of a multitude of narratives – collective and individual – relating to past, present and future (Torchin 2014).

**Memory Wars**

However, the different types of trauma in films are only one aspect of cinema’s role in traumatic remembrance and reconciliation. Perhaps rather than asking how, we should ask who this position of witness is precisely directed towards. As Caton (1999) asserts, spectator positions are essential when trying to understand the wider role of representations. Because of cinema’s potential in acknowledging and prioritising different forms of trauma, we must also be critical of how these representations travel and to whom they are directed. As cultural products, these types of representation do not exist in a void, but can be considered as both expressions and reproductions of meaning in a wider sociocultural and political landscape. Just as conflicts themselves, these films too can be seen to possess an extensive afterlife.

Since they occupy a place in discursive networks, economic structures, geopolitical formations, technological innovations and global flows, a treatment of trauma in cinema requires an acknowledgement of the transnational nature of these films. These films have the capability to engage in a reaffirmation of already-established traumas, rectify forgotten or unacknowledged ones or contradict previous historic accounts. Herman (1992: 47) articulates a ‘dialectic of trauma’, in which traumatic experiences are always struggling between oblivion or intrusion. Processing the likes of historic trauma is thus always a matter of
balancing between the need to articulate these events and the inexpressibility of them. As a mass-medium and global industry, cinema has the potential to reveal traumatic narratives that remain unacknowledged to a transcultural audience. Moreover, film can go beyond informing audiences and can emotionally involve them through wider politics of identification. Such vicarious witnessing and affective involvement can influence the patterns of remembering and recovery. Not only does bearing witness constitute ‘a specific form of collective remembering that interprets an event as significant and deserving of critical attention’ (Zelizer 2000: 52), but this process also contributes to post-conflict societies because it ‘brings individuals together on their way to collective recovery’ (2000: 52). Nevertheless, these wounds of war have to be acknowledged before they can be properly treated, and it is therefore important to take into account the global power dynamics and structural imbalances at play in this commemoration.

As Rothberg (2009: 3) argues, memory is subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing. Despite the fact that all narratives on historical trauma stemming from conflict contribute to the cultural discourse on these events, it is safe to say not all narratives have the same potential to help sustain or subvert such dominant historical readings. Some historical trauma enters a cycle of almost ritual remembering, such as the Holocaust, while other conflicts remain at risk to be symbolically annihilated and retracted from the likes of history writing. From a political-economic point of view, we can argue that the cinematic sustainment or disruption of a memory hegemony is dependent on the production and distribution infrastructure of the industry that supports said narratives. Such representations should be considered as part of the logics of wider media industries. The unbalanced flow of international capital not only leads to an underexposure and overexposure of certain subjects, but when applied to the likes of trauma also distributes a commercial worth to the representation of such subjects. Films that tackle the Cambodian, Rwandan and Armenian genocide, to name but a few, appear in far smaller numbers than those dealing with the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and 9/11. We argue that this cinematic remembering has nothing to do with the severity or geopolitical importance of the event in itself, but much more with the Western cultural proximity towards such events, together with the already-established hegemonic acknowledgement of what happened as a political fact.

This illustrates what Margalit (2003: 80) called ‘the danger of biased salience’. Because Euro-American traumas have had more exposure and are well known, these events are deemed morally more significant than atrocities elsewhere. When expanding upon the example of the
Armenian Genocide, which is still being contested by Turkey despite being widely acknowledged by the international community, a kind of lifeline of cinematic trauma becomes evident. As the Armenian Genocide has gained greater acknowledgement, this historic trauma progressed along the lines of cinematic visibility. While it is evident that these stories are near-impossible to tell in Turkey, gradually international film-makers from, among others, the United States and Europe have started tackling these events for international distribution. The representation of the genocide went through stages of European art-house films such as *The Cut* (2014) and independent productions starring American A-list actors, *Triage* (2009), before becoming increasingly recognised as a possible subject matter for mainstream film-makers. With the recent release of the first big-budget Hollywood period-piece *The Promise* (2016), it can be argued that, as a site of trauma, the Armenian Genocide has entered a new circle of postmemorial work.

**How Trauma Travels**

Occupying a place in transcultural spheres, these films offer multiple levels of identification, be it regional, national or transnational. Yet, it is essential to understand to which type of audience this position of vicarious witnessing is structured, whose trauma is specifically voiced and where these notions proliferate. A prevailing implication with the production and dissemination of non-Western traumas is the reproduction of certain ethnocentric discourses. The cinematic representation of events such as the Rwandan and Cambodian Genocides might be a transnational matter, but these representations often remain embedded in an American-centric and Eurocentric worldview and/or Western production context and cast. As Elsaesser (2016: 16) points out, it is not uncommon for media to involve the suffering of others in a process of commodification. Conflict-related traumas are a locus for drama and many film-makers use these films as background, topic or form in an attempt to tap into their topicality and intensity, albeit for a wide number of reasons. Occupied with the consumption of trauma as spectacle, Kaplan and Wang (2004) meticulously investigate how trauma can be repackaged as popular fiction. Their concern is that such representations lead to a trivialisation of such events. Aiming for collective identification, these films try to involve the spectator in the experience of witnessing. Ellis (2000: 11) conceptualised this experience as one of ‘separation and powerlessness’. Films play on these feelings of powerlessness or, as Elsaesser (2016: 16) notes: ‘It is such
combinations of victimhood and power – in short, of negative agency –
which make certain post-conflict situations both topical and of general
interest, but also morally volatile, historically specific and politically
precarious; and perhaps especially under these aggravated conditions,
they become topics fit for the cinema.’ For Kaplan and Wang (2004),
the identification we are meant to feel, is a morbid one. Real historic
trauma is moulded into spectacles through myths and narratives that
are set to excite. Such obsession fits in a wider ‘wound culture’ (Seltzer
1997: 253), one where ‘the very notion of sociality is bound to the exci-
tations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual,
as public spectacle’.

However, some authors see constructive potential in these mediated
renderings of trauma and believe that the representation of trauma
has the power to generate a new type of memory, one that transcends
national boundaries and the conceptions of the self and ‘the other’.
Writing that ‘in a catastrophic age … trauma might provide the very
link between cultures’, Caruth (1996: 18) is in search of a type of hu-
manist commonality stemming from a shared memory across groups
of people who might be seen as different communities. History thus
becomes an interconnected cultural product in which we all have
the power to participate (Leys 2000: 285). In the same vein, Levy and
Sznaider (2002) argue that Holocaust discourse has been responsible
for establishing a type of ‘cosmopolitan memory’. This remembering
extends the group memory to citizens of the world. This global dif-
fusion of memory should, according to them, be evaluated positively
since it can enhance the respect for democracy and human rights.
Starting from Landsberg’s (2004) nominal concept of ‘prosthetic
memory’, one could be optimistic about this type of cross-cultural
memory. Landsberg notes that as transnationally distributed mass
media, cinema offers experiential sites for the processes of exploita-
tion and commercialisation, but also, and more importantly for our ar-
gument, of remembrance and commemoration. These films offer the
spectator a site of identification with histories that are not their own,
and therefore take away memory from a particular social context. Films
contribute to a prosthetic remembrance, a site of memory somewhere
between the individual and the collective. In this process, an empathic
link is formed with traumatised subjects, one that can potentially con-
tribute to political and ethical action.

While this discourse on the symbolic importance of cross-cultural
identification features heavily in trauma theory, it has received a great
deal of criticism. There are structural problems to the symbolic ex-
tension Caruth (1996) offers. It is debatable to what extent Holocaust
discourse has contributed to a more war-weary world instead of offering states an interpretive frame through which pre-emptive action can be legitimised (Meek 2011). Alexander (2003: 54) makes reference to the Holocaust as now functioning as an almost globally acknowledged ‘sacred-evil’ myth. The use of Nazi comparisons of George W. Bush before the invasion of Iraq, and the literal equating of Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler, are just two examples of how the memory of the atrocities of the Second World War could be incorporated into jingoist political rhetoric, with grave results. Thus, such a reference point only reiterated an understanding of conflict as consisting of monster perpetrators that need to be fought. While the belief in the unifying power of shared understanding stemming from trauma is well-meant, by starting from the self-evidence and objectivity of the pain of others, and taking the identification with culturally specific situations for granted, it is easy to relapse into melodramatic sentiments (Kaplan and Wang 2004: 15). In this respect, Kaplan and Wang (2004: 9) warn of the eliciting of ‘empty’ empathy, in which feelings of misery are decontextualised and are used for little more than cheap sentiment. If inciting social action is the goal of these films, more is needed than isolated images of injustice, violence and cruelty. Moreover, the belief in universalised culturally specific trauma always runs the risks that it ‘flattens difference, history, memory, and the body into an abstract, pleasing mold’ (Kaplan and Wang 2004: 11). This can lead to a ‘cinema of indifference’, in which conflicts, and their related traumas, become almost interchangeable (Smets 2015: 2443).

While it is true that, as Elsaesser (2016) argued, representing trauma can lead to narratives of ‘universalisation’ by functioning as a symbolic referent to the value of human life and the wickedness of man, there are structural indifferences that cannot be ignored. One such problem is that historic trauma is very much treated from a Western perspective. Not only can ‘the “iconic” traumas of modern media – Vietnam, the Holocaust, 9/11 – … be understood as symptoms of a deeper crisis emerging from the historical impact of imperialism, colonialism and globalization’ (Meek 2011: 28), but our theorisation of trauma is also very much a Western conception (Craps 2012: 4). Therefore, several authors such as Craps (2012) and Visser (2011) set the goal to decolonise trauma theory. Both in cultural production and in scholarly research, the traumatic experiences of non-Western cultures are greatly marginalised. Craps (2012: 3) is mostly frustrated with the universal validity implied in our conceptualisation of trauma, without critically acknowledging that it stems from the history of Western modernity. He rightfully notices that ‘hegemonic definitions of trauma have been
criticized for being culturally insensitive and exclusionary, and charges of cultural imperialism have been levelled at the uncritical cross-cultural application of Western trauma concepts in the context of international humanitarian disaster relief programmes’ (2012: 3). A notable exception is the work of Lester (2013), who provides an overview of a critical anthropology of trauma in ongoing, developing human relationships. Considering the capacity to relate to others ‘beyond the specifics of the trauma or their “damaged” identity’ (Lester 2013: 760) as a core component in post-traumatic reconciliation, he opts to connect classic anthropological concerns in relation to trauma and social organisations with a political economic perspective on the commodification of victimhood.

Nevertheless, there is still a great deal of bias and misrepresentation concerning non-Western trauma. Often, when represented at all, such events are treated as regressive chapters in history (Kaplan and Wang 2004: 18) and it is not uncommon for films dealing with such non-Western trauma to take a white Western protagonist (e.g. the journalist, human aid worker or peacekeeper) as an entry point into foreign conflict. Films as The Killing Fields (1984), Salvador (1986) and Darfur (2009) and many more offer non-Western conflict as a kind of transitory space through which white heroes tackle personal feelings of responsibility and regret, before finding redemption. Thus, reaching out to our cultural ‘others’, as Caruth (1996) intended, can lead to the appropriation of their suffering (Craps 2012: 3). Nassar (2002: 27–28) goes as far as to speak of a ‘colonisation’ of memory. However, as we will discuss further on, some films try to actively resist this commodification and appropriation of trauma by distancing themselves from the belief of giving an objectivity account of events.

Cinematic Recall and Conflict Reparation

Another such criticism lies in the filmic treatment of historic trauma as individual experiences of isolated events, thus failing to acknowledge structurally embedded, everyday forms of traumatising violence. Films such as The Battle of Algiers (1966) and Chronicle of the Years of Fire (1975) are involved in a form of trauma work that somewhat resists classical categorisations. Tackling longer periods of colonial oppression and political persecution, these films succeed in reconceptualising historical trauma so as to include periods of colonial rule. As Craps (2012: 72) argues, the academic conception of trauma as isolated and event-like has led to trauma theory failing to acknowledge wider regimes
of oppression – such as many passages of Western colonial rule. It is therefore no coincidence that the systemic atrocities perpetrated in or against colonies and minority communities take a back seat in favour of historic tragedies enacted within or against Western Europe and the United States. In this way, structural inequalities are further obscured and the hegemonic conception of history obeyed. There is also a great lack of dialogue in the remembrance of events. Too often dominant notions of traumatic passages in history get reiterated in the process of commemoration, leading to a reaffirmation of hegemonic remembering. Furthermore, using claims of authenticity and historicity as ways of enacting authority upon the spectator, trauma films enforce an aura of truthfulness upon the spectators concerning the perception of these passages. Yet, as Alexander (2004: 118) points out, there is always a process of interpretation present in the representation of trauma. Events can get misrepresented or facts misconstrued, and it is easy to see how a lack of diversity in perspectives can contribute to a narrow remembering of events. The shortage of films on the Vietnam War told from the viewpoint of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, let alone produced in Vietnam, could be considered as attributing to a more rigid mode of remembrance. The same can be said of many types of conflicts in which the United States was involved and that were subsequently appropriated for dramatic and commercial purposes. Moreover, because these histories are greatly narrativised along the lines of the dominant Hollywood narrative structure, the greater forces at play in the realisation of conflict-related atrocities get reduced to interpersonal conflict between individuals with different political agendas (Elsaesser 2016: 16).

Conflict-related traumas are thus reshaped into relations of little more than victims and villains, in the process denying the remembering of these events a complexity they require. Therefore, we are in need of counter-narratives that attempt to subvert the memories solemnly held. In relation to the reparation of post-conflict societies, such systematic representations of victim and villains could be problematic because they persist in the construction of the very antagonism between parties that often leads to trauma in the first place (Cairns, Niens and Tam 2005). As Worthington and Aten (2010: 56) assert: ‘Forgiveness and reconciliation help heal past memories, restore present trust, and thus pave the way for breaking future cycles of trauma.’ If we are to renegotiate trauma work in a manner that does not give rise to ongoing hostilities, sentiments of forgiveness and moral inclusion must also persevere cinematically. However, in a post-conflict context, it is not uncommon to hold on to the binary distinction of victims and villains. According to Elsaesser (2016: 22), such distinctions are ‘preliminary crucial but
subsequently problematic and controversial’ – crucial because it is important for the survivors for their suffering to be acknowledged and guilt attributed, but problematic because such one-sided attribution fails to acknowledge the traumatic experiences of the perpetrators.

Because of the accumulation of injustices, cruelty and grief during violent conflict, the parties involved often perceive themselves as victims. Denying the enactors of traumatic experience any sense of victimhood is to deny them any real history, which can be particularly problematic in a post-conflict society because all parties eventually have to be peacefully reintegrated into society (Martz 2010: 12; see also the chapters by Oldenburg and Bräuchler in this volume on the challenges of transforming and reconciling identities in post-conflict societies). Freedman (1998: 200) conceptualises reconciliation as the societal restoration of violated trust amongst actors. When inner-group/outer-group distinctions are equated with that of victim and perpetrator, and these negative associations persist in post-conflict contexts, they have the potential to pave the way for a new generation of conflict and trauma. Worthington and Aten (2010: 64) argue that in order to build lasting structures of peace, it is essential that ‘both parties or groups need to consider the others’ experiences of threat and sense of injustice’. Cinema can be an important attribute in moulding the memories of such traumatic events, and in helping new generations interpreting these events as either a Manicheist testament to the cruelty of the ‘other’ or a complex entwinement of tensions and misperceptions resulting in conflict.

If cinema is to contribute to processes of reconciliation, the generic inclination to demonise and provide an easy antagonist should be resisted by film-makers. Whilst the recognition of suffering is a crucial first step in the representation of conflict-related trauma, it is of prime importance for films in the aftermath of trauma to move past such tense divisions and attempt to offer a wider understanding of the historical forces, and arbitrary difference, that lie at the root of these traumas. Joshua Oppenheimer’s now widely renowned The Act of Killing can be considered a rare example of a film that successfully negotiates notions of perpetrator and victim roles in a post-conflict society. Identifying the perpetrators of the Indonesian killings in order to attribute guilt is not Oppenheimer’s main objective, mostly because these figures are already exposed, not to mention considered notable by many, and also because he attempts to resist a sense of indignation built around these actions. Rather than offering a portrait of monsters, the banality of evil is here investigated by making the Indonesian war criminal complicit in peeling away the layers of self-righteousness and mechanisms
of legitimisation that made them capable of such horrific crimes. If trauma disrupts our notions of self, as conceptualised by Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (1996), we have to be thoughtful of how these notions of identity are to be reconstructed and which place former enemies and cultural ‘others’ hold in this redefinition (see also Bräuchler 2015).

It has to be stressed that cinematic representations are not the only way to learn about such violent passages of history. As Paramaditha (2013: 48) argues in relation to the post-conflict work of The Act of Killing, instead of demanding these films to count as the conclusive testament of the events that took place, they should foremost be considered as a starting point. Cinema has the potential to identify how such memories are being handled and how national and international communities alike can still work towards the recognition, rectification or atonement of these traumatic histories. The Act of Killing in this sense did not close one fixed narrative as many films on conflict-related traumas attempt to do; alternatively, it opened up the conversation. Moreover, the film itself remains an entry point into an otherwise difficult-to-access part of Indonesian history, for young Indonesians and international citizens alike. As was stated earlier, trauma travels and as long as film-makers conscientiously work with events, the medium of cinema will continue to form a suitable channel for the transcultural expeditions of these private and collective histories.

Conclusion

Olweean (2003: 271) rightfully states that ‘communal psychological wounds are one of the most – if not the most – powerful fuel of war and violent conflicts’. In this chapter, we offered a theoretical introduction into the representation of conflict-related trauma in cinema. Considering cinema as a symbolic battleground through which different types of remembering are crystallised, subverted and negotiated, we have illustrated the potential of films in the commemoration and reconciliation of conflict-related trauma. This two-tier theoretical overview into trauma films as cultural products and as an academic field thus provided a framework through which the relationship between trauma representation and memory construction can be better understood. By going through the dominant modes of cinematic treatment of conflict-related atrocities and trends in trauma theory, this chapter has therefore tried to raise questions and incites readers into further investigation.
Questions of ethics, representability, agency, identification and universalisation still occupy the field, and while scholarly investigation is expanding, there remains a lot of work to be done. Considering the debate on how filmic narratives interact with the wider space of memory, we theorised how such narratives can interact with conflict reconciliation and cross-cultural solidarity. Films aid in the specific remembering of events, but are far more than mnemonic devices in the representation and conveyance of memory. As has been illustrated, some authors share a belief in the representation of trauma as spreading cross-cultural solidarity and aiding in the formation of a global community. However, these claims have to be approached with caution because they leave us at risk of instrumentalising the suffering of ‘others’ and neglecting what these events meant for a particular group of people at a particular time. Working with an exclusively Western conception of historic trauma has led to the structural neglect of specific passages of history and to a narrow conceptualising of trauma. Instead of the individually focused, event-obsessed treatment of historic trauma, cinema should grasp the opportunity to reveal and deconstruct the structural, pervasive dimensions of such atrocities, and deliver narratives that break the victim/villain binary that is so heavily established within these films. If we agree that media are co-constitutive of conflicts, the role of cinema and the responsibilities of film-makers deserve the full consideration of scholars working on conflict and its transformations across different contexts.

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