Why "9/11 is [not] unique," or: Troping Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Presenting a three-part argument, this essay explores the proliferation of the complex and controversial term trauma and its function in both current cultural analysis and identity politics. Why this desire to subsume historically distinct experiences under a dominant trope? And why, in particular, conceptualize the—supposedly singular—events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermaths as both 'illegible' and constitutive of 'new identities'? Interrogating trauma studies, which oscillate between theorizing the 'unrepresentability' of trauma and spelling out its narratives, the essay reads such tropings as a fundamental force of interdependent practices of memory and forgetting. Locating as one of its central urges a desire to override the distinction between collective experience and personal trauma, the essay turns to cultural practices that were 'inspired' by the events of 9/11 and often considered as ways of 'working through' their traumatic dimension. After revisiting the early construction site of Ground Zero and Daniel Libeskind's design for the reconstruction of the area, I turn to Art Spiegelman's serial art. Rather than offering narratives of trauma, Spiegelman's In the Shadow of No Towers (2004) ironizes the notion that trauma can be appropriately narrated and instead foregrounds that, in the case of trauma, mediation and closure are hard to come by. In this way his comix resists the cultural matrix in which trauma works as a model of identity that is ultimately exclusionary and closed-off: a matrix in which post-9/11 politics could easily have its way.

During the last four decades, the Holocaust has evolved as the paradigmatic trope and reference for—historically as well as experientially—distinct kinds of human suffering, ranging from the transatlantic slave trade and the genocides committed against the Native Americans and the Armenians to the Cultural Revolution in China, from the AIDS epidemic and abortion to 9/11 and Abu Ghraib. This process of disseminating the Holocaust has been accompanied by a proliferation of the term trauma and its rise to prominence as "one of the key interpretative categories of contemporary politics and culture" (Kansteiner 193). "[L]argely inspired by the Holocaust debates" (Alexander, “Moral Universals” 201), the term inaugurated the field of 'trauma studies' during the 1990s and has persistently echoed through the 'booming' debates on conceptions and cultures of memory and forgetting, impacting what Ian Hacking has termed "memoropolitics" ever since (qtd. in Leys 7). Even before 9/11, "the spectrum of issues raised by the concept of psychic trauma in our time" ranged, as Ruth Leys argued

in 2000, from the “appalling outrages of the kind experienced by [...] kidnapped children of Uganda” to the post-traumatic stress disorder Paula Jones claimed to have suffered as a result “of her alleged sexual harassment by President Clinton” (2). Accordingly, the field of trauma studies lacks cohesion and still presents us “a wide diversity of opinion on the nature of trauma” (6).

Striking about this “obsession” with (LaCapra x) and “fetishization” of (Ball 1) the psychoanalytic and medical term trauma—which genealogy Leys has traced from the work of British physician John Erichsen to that of neurobiologist and physician Bessel A. van der Kolk, from a wound of the brain to a wound of the mind and back to the body (Leys 3, 4, 6)—is its significant shift in status: like the Holocaust, once considered an experienced event that resists representation, trauma now frequently—and quite paradoxically—works as a trope of the complexities of signification and its losses, on the one hand, and as a “sign of our times” (Kansteiner 194), on the other. Individual trauma, whether of a structural or historical kind, can, so the (Freudian) argument goes, neither be spoken nor remembered; according to van der Kolk, it produces an “insistent literality” due to a particular encoding in the brain that differs from ordinary memory (Leys 7). Cultural trauma, however,—at least so we are made to believe—is nowadays recollected, narrated, and visualized in multiple ways. Jackson A. Nidai, II, speaks of a “rhetoric of trauma” (59), Jeffrey C. Alexander even considers trauma “a new master narrative” (“Theory” 10), and Susannah Radstone calls trauma “a ‘popular cultural script’ in need of contextualization and analysis in its own right: a symptom, the cause of which needs to be sought elsewhere” (189). Moreover, just as the Holocaust arguably became the basis of contemporary Jewish identity, trauma has transmuted into a constitutive moment, a “stabilizer” (Assmann) of both individual and cultural identity and history during the 1990s and even more so after 9/11, which Neil J. Smelser deems “perhaps the greatest trauma in the nation’s history” (264). For E. Ann Kaplan, among others, the “politics of terror and loss” has given rise to so-called “national trauma” and “trauma cultures” which forge new identities and “subjectivities through the shocks, disruptions and confusions that accompany them” (20) and which may even “permit a kind of emphatic ‘sharing’ that moves us forward, if only by inches” (37). Likewise, Ron Eyerman reconceptualized slavery as both a “cultural trauma” and “the root of an emergent African American identity” (1).

It is legitimate to wonder about this prominence of a term that is as controversial as it is complex. Trauma studies owe much to psychoanalysis; and the term “trauma envy” (Mowit) carries only a tiny portion of that debt. While the field inherited “the trope of unrepresentability” from the work of Theodor W. Adorno, Jean François Lyotard, Shoshana Felman (Ball 10), Dori Laub, and Cathy Caruth, as well as van der Kolk and, according to Leys, has come to “relish [...] the modish idea that the domain of trauma is the unspeakable and unrepresentable” (304), trauma theory has helped to make the Holocaust a contemporary locus of the “negative sublime,” as Andrew S. Gross suggests in his essay on “Holocaust Tourism in Berlin.” Trauma discourse may also be seen, though, as claiming the authority of the Holocaust trope and thus accounting for the gradual failing of this authority by empowering a potentially all-inclusive rhetorical figure. And this has turned out to be a highly effective move in many ways. As a trope, trauma not only seems to bridge the difference between individual and historical experience, as studies such as Kaplan’s suggest (20). Trauma studies also minimizes, as Radstone argues, “the inner world’s mediation of the external world [...] foregrounded by psychoanalytic theory” (qtd. in Kaplan 35). And by a series of “category mistakes” (Kansteiner) trauma has been turned into a global condition. Or as Alexander puts it: “The horrific trauma of the Jews became the trauma of all humankind” (“Moral Universals” 231).

After all, “most people encounter trauma through the media,” as Kaplan claims (2). And as we have come “to speak of a globalization of Holocaust discourse” and employ the Holocaust “as a universal trope for historical trauma,” we have also created what Andreas Huyssen calls “the globalization paradox” (“Present Pasts” 23). While, on the one hand, the Holocaust “has become a cipher for the twentieth century as a whole and for the project of enlightenment,” it has also also Holocaust memory, as Huyssen points out, “to latch on to specific local situations that are historically distant and politically distinct from the original event.” Thus, “[i]n the transnational movement of memory discourses,” the Holocaust has also lost “its quality as index of the specific historical event and begins to function as a metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories.” This displacement, in turn, may at the same time “screen memories or simply block insight into specific local histories” (“Present Pasts” 24).

Why this proliferation of the term trauma to begin with? I wonder? What cultural work does this concept achieve? Why this desire to subsume historically distinct individual and ‘collective’ experiences under dominant prêt-à-porter tropes? What are we suggesting when we conceptualize the supposedly singular events of 11 September 2001—“9/11 is unique” writes Kaplan (141)—and their aftermaths as traumatic? In other words, the central issue I ponder throughout this essay is why there is this desire to override, by way of the figure of the Holocaust and the critical practice of trauma theory, the unmistakable distinction between collective experience and personal trauma. Approaching these questions from three differ-

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1 In her book, Leys traces the history of the concept of trauma and complicates our sense of trauma by distinguishing mimetic and anti-mimetic theories of trauma. While arguing that mimetic and anti-mimetic theories of trauma have always coexisted, the tension between the two positions remains “unresolved” (305). The first mode “holds that trauma, or the experience of the traumatized subject, can be understood as involving a kind of hypnotic imitation or identification in which, precisely because the victim cannot recall the original traumatogenic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it” (298). Anti-mimetic theories of trauma, by contrast, are based on the assumption that “in hypnotic imitation the subject is essentially aloof from the traumatic experience, in the sense that she remains a spectator of the traumatic scene, which she can therefore see and represent to herself and others” (299). For a summary of this argument, see Leys 298-307.

2 In his introduction to the collection 110 Stories: New York Writers After 9/11, Ulrich Baer speaks of “the need for narrative in the wake of disaster,” yet also insists that unlike political rhetoric and Hollywood cinema, which aim at closure, “literature resists the call for closure” (qtd. in Kaplan 137).

3 For an engaging critique of Caruth’s argument, see Leys 266-97.
ent angles—an interest, first, in the interrelation of memory, mediation, and seri-
ality; second, in the interdependence of Black-Jewish relations in U.S.-American
culture; and third, in the cultural work of “strong tropes”—I do not propose to
answer them. Nor can I in fact complicate these questions; they are complicated
enough as they are. And yet I wonder in what ways the uses and abuses of the term
trauma in many assessments of post-9/11 U.S.-American cultural climates relate
to Holocaust discourses and thus vicariously to African American matters. If the
proliferation of the term Holocaust and Holocaust remembrance in U.S.-Ameri-
can culture is, as I argue elsewhere, in part a symptom of forgetting and denial—of
forgetting that “the Holocaust experience is not central to the American national
experience” (Sittler) and of denying while implicitly acknowledging central “trau-
matic” dimensions of U.S.-American history—how does the proliferation of the
term trauma in post-9/11 culture relate to this kind of amnesia? Does the rhetoric
of trauma mark a continued displacement of race matters or does it acknowledge
this kind of forgetting? Finally, how does trauma discourse relate to post-9/11
U.S.-American politics? Does trauma as a trope work alongside processes of de-
politicization, in part by psychoanalyzing a city, as Kaplan does (136-37), or a
nation and thus making a blatantly political matter—the events and aftermath of
11 September 2001—appear all too personal? Or do concepts of cultural trauma
politicize and recontextualize, yet in turn also simplify the complexities of subjec-
tivity? And in what way does trauma as a trope of rupture and dissociation echo
the dominant temporal trajectory of a world before and after 9/11 which tends to
reproduce in an inverted manner the world view projected by the Bush admin-
istration?

This paper explores some of these questions by developing a three-part argu-
ment. In part one, I explore the amplification of the term trauma and its function
in both current cultural analysis and identity politics. Whereas the appropriation
of the Holocaust as a trope has allowed us to both associate, by way of metonymy
and metaphor, distinct moments in history and to ‘Americanize’ the Holocaust,
the prominence of the term trauma ushers in psychoanalysis and along with it
moments of rupture, void, and erasure rather than remembrance. Metonymically
related to the Holocaust, the term trauma not only allows all of us our share of
‘holocaustal experience.’ It also restores to the Holocaust an individual, personal
dimension while retaining its ‘unrepresentability.’ As a trope, trauma moreover
manages to re-member and thus, in a very literal sense, to partially restore the
subjectivity of members of ethnic groups that were never re-recognized as subjects
in psychoanalytic terms. Moreover, it returns the very subject that poststructural-
ism reduced to an effect of discourse to its (albeit mutilated) body, opening up
new paths of cultural interpretation.

In the second half of part one, I focus on how trauma has figured in analyses of
post-9/11 (U.S.-American) cultures and how 9/11 has impacted theorizations of
cultural trauma. Drawing on Ley's work, I wonder how trauma is conceived of
in this particular context and question the rote repetition of trauma-theory comm-
monplaces. Given the fact that symptoms of post-traumatic stress tend to “make
their first appearance after a considerable lapse of time, even years after the
traumatic event” (Ley 15), how appropriate is the term, after all? How does our—
primarily psychoanalytic—sense of the Holocaust as “the crucial trauma of the [last]
century” shift by such appropriation of the term, as it did before when redefined
by the (predominantly U.S.-American) studies on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
(PTSD), which emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War and relied much less on
psychoanalysis (Ley 15)? In what way do conceptions of trauma, identity, and its
erasure interrelate? And how does the current proliferation of the term trauma
interact with poststructuralist notions of re-presentation?

In parts two and three of my argument, I will turn to cultural practices that
were ‘inspired’ by the events of 9/11 and are often considered as ways of ‘work-
ning through’ their traumatic dimension. After revisiting the early construction
site of Ground Zero and Daniel Libeskind's design for the reconstruction of the
area in part two, in the third section I turn to Art Spiegelman and the “anti-
redemptory medium” of the comic (Young 30) in which, for many a critic, trauma
nonetheless “find[s] expression” (Espiritu 182). His In the Shadow of No Towers
(2004) shows that the “confabulation or elision of transhistorical (or structural)
and historical trauma” (xii), bemoaned by Dominick LaCapra, amounts to a global
visual universe that thrives on mediation, remediation, and seriality and made
9/11, as Jürgen Habermas claimed, into the first global historical event (cf.
 Orbán 70). Trauma, as is invariably argued, is understood, first, as an experience
that immerges the subject in the scene “so profoundly that it precluded the kind
of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened”
(Ley's 9). Second, trauma, according to Ley's summary of Caruth, “cannot be
known,” but returns as “flashbacks,” “nightmares,” and “other repetitive phenom-
ena” (266). Third, re-presentation is always a form of displacement. In view of
these aspects, we may indeed wonder in what ways trauma can figure in works of
art and literature at all. Critical readings of Spiegelman's comix, as he calls his
highly self-reflective graphic productions, generally acknowledge trauma theory's
focus on the ‘unrepresentability’ of traumatic experience as well as Spiegelman's
own engagement with such insights and with matters of mediation. At the same
time, these readings attest to a deep desire to find trauma “re-presented,” be it in
what the images include or what they leave out, and even to see it offer some kind
of soothing “closure” (Whitlock 977, 968ff.).

4 As Kaplan points out, Janet, Breuer, Freud, as well as van der Kolk “stressed the phenom-
enon of dissociation in trauma” (34), a position that dominates, for instance, Caruth’s argument
as well.

5 Thus it is indeed noteworthy that it was Felman and Caruth—both influenced by de Man—
who were so instrumental in developing so-called trauma studies in the 1990s (Kaplan 34), while
at the same time aligning the insights of this new field with deconstruction. However, I find it
futile to reinterpret deconstruction, as Kaplan does, as “a screen that masked emotion and the
body—pects of life that trauma theory hoped to introduce” (35). As is quite obvious, ‘trauma
theory’ has its (many) blind spots, too.

6 The term was introduced in 1984 by the American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (cf. Kaplan 33).
I. Remembering 9/11, Romancing Trauma

Unlike the term Holocaust, the concept of trauma is not used as a trope of remembering, forgetting, and recognition, but of modes of repetition and revision, giving rise to a “haunting” of what cannot even be remembered and thus truly “confound[s] ordinary forms of understanding” (Belau. par. 1). Thus trauma is the phenomenon par excellence which allows us to repeatedly reproduce the process of uncovering what is concealed, a process fundamental to all knowledge production, while at the same time frustrating our desire to know. Moreover, the claim that trauma resists representation is frequently aligned with a poststructuralist agenda and the so-called “crisis of representation.” Caruth, for instance, conjures empirical science and literary theory, as Leys points out, or more precisely, correlates van der Kolk’s neurobiological account of trauma as being dissociated from normal mental processes of cognition with Paul de Man’s theory of language performativity and the “widely shared assumptions about the constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era” (Ley’s 267-68). From this perspective, Leys argues, “language bears witness” to trauma “only by a failure of witnessing or representation” (268). Moreover, the “unrepresentable” is not merely transmissible; it is also imagined, as Leys points out with reference to Caruth, “as an ineluctable process of infection and as involving an ethical obligation on the part of the listener” (269). Kaplan claims that “the reader or viewer of stories or films about traumatic situations may be constituted through vicarious or secondary trauma” (39). I think that this discursive as well as experiential exceptionality—an approach to trauma which, according to Radstone, enjoys an “unquestioned dominance” (188)—is part of the reason why trauma has gained such far-ranging cultural significance with a frame of reference that consistently expands, meanwhile including the origins of psychoanalysis, global “trauma cultures” (Kaplan), and the “trauma of globalization” (Ball 41). Referring to both the state of post-9/11 contemporary cultures and to a universal human condition—the cataclysmic “primal,” yet “missed experience” (Belau par. 16) of subject formation—trauma is no longer an exception, but the rule (see Ball 29-40). We are all traumatized, we like to believe, denying the fact that, as Karyn Ball underscores, the established trauma hierarchy persists only as long as we “ignore the perpetual and relentless trauma of slow death by starvation and disease that affects the destitute communities of the postcolonized world” (41). Or as Slavoj Žižek puts it ironically in his assessment of 9/11: “the real horror happens there, not here” (13).

Trauma does and does not compare to other strong tropes like rape, which has worked as a major force in constructing sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and national identity. Indeed, the dissemination of that figure led scholars in the 1990s to recontextualize the United States as a “rape culture,” while by the end of the 1990s the figure of sexual violence was displaced by the trope of incest and child abuse: a move that allowed for an extension of the status of victim and survivor (cf. Sielke, Reading Rape 183-84). Rape and incest are traumatic experiences that tend to resist representation, but unlike trauma in its more contemporary, abstract formulation, they are ‘real-life events’ with their own traces of memory traces. Likewise, while the term Holocaust, at least for most of us, is anchored in undeniable historical facts, trauma cannot be encoded or inscribed without effecting a “failure of [...] inscription” that, however, “is registered in the symbolic” (Belau. par. 32). Like the ‘real,’ trauma therefore does not simply escape the ‘symbolic’; for what can neither be inscribed nor remembered, as Lyotard emphasized, cannot be forgotten, either. Rather, it marks the limits of the symbolic, while at the same time being retained or conserved across time (cf. Assmann), escaping historicity, yet compulsively returning in phenomena of a kind of Deleuzian repetition and seriality. Thus the salience of the term is, as Susannah Radstone suggests, “less due to its ‘referential’ to catastrophic events [...] than to the revised understandings of referentiality it prompts” (190).

The very “timelessness” of trauma has encouraged us to appropriate and tame trauma “as a transformative event” (Ball 2). Yet as such, the concept has come to serve different purposes in different contexts. Only recently, for instance, has African American criticism begun to claim the term trauma as a trope for a revision of slavery. Given the scope of research on African American history and culture, it is in fact remarkable how comparably little attention has been paid so far to the perspectives and cultures of African American memory and forgetting. This is partly due to the position of psychoanalytical models after Franz Fanon; these perspectives have been superceded, as Hortense Spillers has it, “the missing layer of the hermeneutic/interpretative projects of [...] black intellectuals now at work” (76). While historical and sociological perspectives on African American cultures dominate and the ‘up-from-slavery’ narrative is continuously being reiterated, the African American subject has hardly ever been conceived of as singular, as “one,” but usually figures as a synecdochic representation of “the Race” (88). While the concept of trauma could potentially work as an intervention into this established discursive regime, in practice it has tended to reaffirm the discourse’s dominant trajectory. Ron Eyer- man, for instance, employs the term trauma to reconceptualize slavery as “a primary scene” in “the formation of African American identity,” “which could, potentially, unite all ‘African Americans’ in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa” (1). On the one hand, Eyerman thus appropriates the term trauma to underscore the validity of what both Caruth and Felman consider the intergenerational “contingousness” of trauma (Ley’s 284) and of what Alison Landsberg calls “prosthetic memory,” “a new form of public cultural memory,” driven in part by “the technologies of mass culture that make it possible for anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, to share collective memories—to assimilate as personal experience historical events which they did not live.” Whereas Landsberg sees in prosthetic memory “the po-

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7 On the issue, see, in particular, Leys 266-97.

8 Likewise genres such as the slave narrative, focused as it is on the survival of its protagonist and the paths ‘up from slavery,’ wrongly suggest that concepts of trauma do not apply in this context.

9 As Leys points out, Felman argues that women inherit the traumatic memories of other women "entirely at second hand, as it were, through the mechanism of insidious trauma" (Felman qtd. in Leys 284).
dimension of what the world witnessed on 11 September 2001, either in person or as onlookers safely positioned in front of our TV sets—in fact, almost everybody seemed to agree that ‘the world will never be the same’—both the slave economy and the extermination of German and European Jewry were legitimized as rational operations necessary for the ‘common good’ and considered traumatic in retrospect only. In fact, as Alexander argues in his second contribution to his volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, the essay “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” the dominant post-World War II progressive narrative aimed at “putting mass murder ‘behind us,’ moving on, and getting on with the construction of the new world” (213). While during the late 1940s and early 1950s the very concept of trauma seemed ‘unspeakable’ indeed, at the beginning of the twenty-first century and with reference to 9/11 we may perhaps experience the reverse effect: conceptualized as trauma almost immediately, 9/11 may in hindsight turn out as one catastrophic event in a series which was (in part because the media had prepared us so well for what we witnessed) much less disruptive than it first felt to be. Or in other words: not only is there a clear distinction between conceptions of individual trauma, on the one hand, and cultural and collective traumatization, on the other. We also tend to talk about several different kinds of cultural traumatization, distinguishing not merely personal versus collective experience, but also forms of psychic wounding inflicted at varying distances and through different medial contexts.

Alexander takes as one point of reference for his “theory of cultural trauma” Arthur Neal’s study *National Trauma and Collective Identity: Major Events in the American Century* (1998) and its “enlightenment understanding of trauma” (4) whose “emphasis on the collectivity rather than the individual” (4) suits the scope of his argument. Approaching the Depression, Pearl Harbor, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King from the perspective of social psychology, Neal defines traumatic events as “extraordinary,” “explosive,” and creating “disruption” and “radical change” within a short period of time (Neal qtd. in Alexander, “Theory” 3). Alexander thus offers a framework which easily accommodates the temporal trajectory in which we have couched 9/11. However, he considers the assumption that events by themselves create collective traumatization a “naturalistic fallacy” that needs to be overcome. “Events are not inherently traumatic,” he rightly claims. “Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (“Theory” 8), and an attribution, I may add, that is always mediated in different ways by specific media and their particular effects.

I am debating Alexander at length here because his move “toward a theory of cultural trauma” with an idealist and somewhat prescriptive notion of the “trauma process” seems to demonstrate the central fallacies of current trauma discourse. According to Alexander the “social process of cultural trauma” fills “[t]he gap between event and representation” and it is “carrier groups”—“collective agents of the trauma process”—who make “claims about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply” (“Theory” 11). Alternative and political contexts into which the “traumatic response [...] comes to be embedded” (270).

10 For more detailed analyses of Charles and Walker’s work, see Sielke, “Discourse of Liberalization” and “Images That Injure.”

11 Though by no means uncontested, concepts such as ‘collective memory’—a phenomenon which, according to Sontag, simply does not exist (76)—have come to both dominate and limit the field of research in history, art history, sociology, literary and cultural studies, and many other disciplines as they themselves take part in and monitor processes of forgetting.

12 Taking off from Alexander’s definition, Smelser’s essay is actually much less concerned with delineating what makes 9/11 qualify as cultural trauma than with exploring the larger his-
exander likens this process to speech acts aimed at “persuasively [...] project[ing] the trauma claim to the audience-public” (12) and creating “a new master narrative of social suffering” (15) which provides “compelling answers” to questions regarding “the nature of the pain,” “the nature of the victim,” “[t]he relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience,” and the “[a]tribution of responsibility” (15). Denoting the institutional arenas of “this representational process” as “religious,” “aesthetic,” “legal,” “scientific,” “mass media,” and “state bureaucracy” (15-20), Alexander separates moments of mediation (“aesthetic,” “mass media”) from institutions such as the sciences, law, and the state. Circumventing the questions of how cultural trauma is actually being (aesthetically) represented and (mass) mediated and how discourses of trauma take their distinct shapes within particular institutional settings, he cannot really explain how trauma becomes a “socially mediated attribution” (91).

For after all, the trauma process does not “enter [...] the mass media”; like the protagonists of what Alexander calls “trauma drama,” this process is part of a performance that is always already on stage. In fact, the very “obsessions with memory” (25) and the past (as opposed to the future) are inextricably linked, as Huysen convincingly argues, to the increasingly fast-paced, fleeting, and commercialized forms of (new) mediation and the circulation of images, spectacles, and events which, together, make the past sell better (yet not necessarily last longer) than the future; yet they come at the price of permanence and stability (“Present Passes” 29-30, 34). Huysen therefore speaks of “the memory syndrome of the culture industry” (32), which he considers to be anxiety-driven (33), of “a mnemonic fever caused by the cybervirus of amnesia” (37). Also, I doubt that “[i]nsofar as meaning work takes place in the aesthetic realm, it will be channelled by specific genres and narrativ es that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis” (Alexander, “Theory” 15). Meaning always takes shape in some aesthetic form, though we certainly need to distinguish different kinds of aesthetics. And even if trauma processes work by way of narratives, it remains debatable whether the tales they relate aim at identificatory states and catharsis. Rather, “imaginative identification and emotional catharsis” seem to be the aim of a certain branch of trauma studies, a branch deeply invested in what Alexander with characteristic vagueness terms the “moral lessons that [...] emanate from [traumatic events]” (15, 27).

Curiously enough, even though trauma can neither be remembered nor forgotten, is “not compatible with the self,” and destabilizes identity (Assmann 26), 9/11, in a manner similar to the Holocaust, is re-fashioned as a traumatic memory that stabilizes new—communal as well as personal—identities. Under attack, Smelser recalls, Americans felt themselves to be “one again” (270). And it is maybe a desire to maintain this feeling, which the highly mediated event of 9/11 has, first and foremost, generated: a dynamic which Kaplan’s book Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature (2005), in particular, seems to suggest. In this study, Kaplan “extend[s] the term trauma to include suffering terror” (1) and the “supreme example of a catastrophe,” the events of 9/11. What is central in her redefinition of trauma is that for her these “events [...] produced a new personal identity” (2). Granted that trauma destabilizes identity, this claim makes sense only if we read trauma as an effect of dissociative amnesia or as part of a personal identity politics—a politics, though, that is politically problematic. Just as the hyperbolically ‘rape-crisis discourse’ of the 1990s risked trivializing ‘real rape,’ trauma discourse, first, risks disregarding ‘real trauma.’

According to LaCapra,

the indiscriminate generalization of the category of survivor and the overall conflation of history or culture with trauma, as well as the near fixations on enacting or acting out post-traumatic symptoms have the effect of obscuring crucial historical distinctions; they may as well block processes that counteract trauma and its symptomatic after-effects but which do not obliterate their force and insistence—notably, processes of working through, including those conveyed in institutions and practices that limit excess and mitigate trauma. (xi)

LaCapra himself, however, re-reads trauma back into 1950s and 1960s culture: “Some of the most powerful forms of modern art and writing as well as the most compelling forms of criticism (including forms of deconstruction),” he claims, offering Mark Rothko and Jacques Derrida as prominent examples, “often seem to be traumatic writing or posttraumatic writing in close proximity to trauma” (23). Thus trauma has also become a new parameter of cultural revision. As such it seems to invite us to retrospectively trace the ‘holocaustal’ subtext of cultural productions which evolved at a time when Holocaust remembrance was taboo and dominated by silence. This also underscores a central function of the trauma trope: seen through its lens, the Holocaust, a historical event held to be exceptional, has been transformed into a universal human experience. And since that experience cannot per se be spoken, all our silences turn out to be meaningful, all complexities are reduced to a singular seemingly transparent continuity.

At the same time, trauma functions prominently as a trope of fracture. By reaffirming the temporal trajectory of a world before and after September 11, 2001, the claim that 9/11 was a traumatic and transformative cultural experience reproduces in an inverted manner the world view disseminated by the Bush administration—a view that allowed legitimizing changes of policies, violations of international conventions, and the war in Iraq by insisting on a rupture which Kristiann Versluis describes as a “semiotic” one (989; cf. also Kaplan 15). As becomes evident in texts on trauma and 9/11, this trajectory relegates serality and continuity between pre- and post-9/11 culture—be it continuities in the foreign policy of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the demonization of Islamic cultures in the early 1990s and after 9/11, or in the serial repercussions of aesthetic f orms and effects—to the periphery of our perception. Explorations of the traumatic dimensions of post-9/11 cultures may thus have the ultimate effect of reinforcing the outlook of the Bush administration’s ‘culture of fear.’

By contrast, twenty-first-century U.S.-American cultural practices—from fiction across film to the newly revitalized genre of the cartoon and the comic—resist such an ahistorical view by reacquainting themselves with their own history and matters of intermediality and by interrogating the interdependence of politics, memory, and mediation. In this way, cultural practices not only call into question conceptions of (cultural) history guided by terms of (traumatic) ruptures and
turning points. In foregrounding that practices and perceptions of politics are inseparable from processes of memory, mediation, and forgetting, they invite us to readdress the question how cultural practices—including our use of certain privileged tropes—interrelate with self-conceptions, be they cultural or individual. In the second and third part of this paper, I will therefore focus on cultural artifacts which, emerging as part of a post-9/11 discourse of trauma, at the same time question the concept of rupture foregrounded by post-9/11 cultural theory and politics.

Building on the origin of the term trauma, Mark Seltzer has aptly coined the term “wound culture” as a label for the “collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (3) we engage in, for a cultural practice which “reflects a fundamental reorganisation of the public sphere as a pathological and voyeuristic psychosocial space” (Ball 17). Various installations in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, for instance, invite their visitors to engage in the performance of these pathologies and voyeurisms. The blinds, set up throughout the museum to guard visitors against involuntary confrontations with particularly drastic and disconcerting images, turn history into a peep-show, reposition the spectator as a Peeping Tom, and make media representations of the Holocaust akin to pornography. At the same time, our proliferating wound cultures have also managed to produce an aesthetics that, reemployed in new and historically unrelated contexts such as the aftermath of 9/11 or the remembrance of the genocide perpetrated against the Armenians, obscure historical specificity through echoes of Holocaust remembrance, aligning events and responses with the Holocaust, and thus turning historical differences into affectively generated, universal sameness. Libeskind’s original design for the memorial space of Ground Zero, for example, ambivalently frames the terrorist attack as an event somehow comparable to the Holocaust while at the same time projecting the United States as safe territory for immigrants. The ‘architecture’ of Spiegelman’s *comix*, by contrast, ironically exposes the many lines that U.S.-American Holocaust remembrance, including Spiegelman’s own practice, has overstated. Let us first, however, try to breathe the cultural climate of what Spiegelman in 2004 called “still-fresh wounds” (introduction, n. pag.).

II. Designing Ground Zero, Dressing the Wound

In the early aftermath of 9/11, Ground Zero—the 16-acre “wound,” the “sacrosanct void” (Esriputi 179), or, as Kaplan has it, “[t]he great yawning crematorium” (136) in downtown Manhattan—became a significant and highly symbolic part of an ongoing, fundamentally American rhetoric of new frontiers, transformation, and ‘rebirth.’ In many ways the most famous construction site after Potsdamer Platz in Berlin consisted a new virgin land in the U.S.-American cultural imaginary, a liminal space that, while—unlike most realms of liminality—leaving little room for ambiguity, ambivalence, and irony, though, still allowed some artists and thinkers to symbolically salvage the enterprise called America. Let us briefly revisit the place that some now call ‘project rebirth.’ In the summer of 2002 the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation “initiated a world wide search for design and planning professionals to propose visionary designs” for the area. It called for “an appropriate setting for a memorial, a bold new skyline to rise in Lower Manhattan, a better-connected downtown and a range of uses on the site” (1). From all in all 400 submissions the concept design by the Studio Daniel Libeskind was selected in February 2003—the mission being to take on an architectural project of immense scale not merely in physical but also symbolic terms (Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, “Summary Report” 2). Ever since, this project has been at the center of a political struggle that, given the scope of its context, does not come as a surprise: victims’ organizations, insurance companies, city and state officials as well as the owner of the World Trade Center lease, Larry Silverstein, debated Libeskind’s design with great intensity, and Silverstein, who preferred more office space than Libeskind meant to provide, appointed David Childs as the chief architect of the “most dramatic part of the design,” the so-called ‘Freedom Tower,” demoting Libeskind from chief to collaborating artist in 2003 (“Libeskind’s WTC Design”).

Despite the transformation the project underwent, the very fact that Libeskind’s design won the initial competition and set the scene for the reconstruction of Ground Zero remains significant as it underscores the politics of symbolism at work here. Without even considering the design itself, one can argue that Libeskind succeeded: first, in part because he is considered the authority for so-called spaces of traumatic memory and, second, because he presented his designs in ways that rechristened narratives and terms central to U.S.-American self-conception, thus ‘rebirth’ the nation from the ruins of 9/11. His strongest competitors, THINK Design, proposed that “Ground Zero should emerge from this tragedy as the first truly Global Center, a place where people can gather to celebrate cultural diversity in peaceful and productive coexistence,” thus phrasing their agenda in transnational multicultural terms; likewise, the design by Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Gwathmey Siegel, Steven Holl, and their partners reject the “contained spaces” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century precedents for urban spaces and privilege by their “21st century Memorial Square” which is “both contained and extended, symbolizing the connections of this place to the city and the world” and other proposals claim to keep “the future of the global city” in mind. Studio Libeskind, by contrast, formulated its vision along well-traveled national lines.15

The very first sentence of Libeskind’s design concept echoes America’s cherished immigration narrative: “I arrived by ship to New York as a teenager, an immigrant, and like millions of others before me, my first sight was the Statue of Liberty and the amazing skyline of Manhattan.” At the same time, in his proposal

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13 For a recent “Progress Report” on Ground Zero, see Kiefer.
15 All quotations are taken from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s website. See “Team THINK Design,” “Team Richard Meier,” “Team SOM et al.”
Libeskind relates the story about how the architect, set on integrating the contradictory public impulses “to acknowledge the terrible deaths [...] while looking to the future with hope,” visited the site “to feel its power and to listen to its voices. And this,” Libeskind—with religiously-tinged pathos—claims, “is what I heard, felt and saw.” He goes on to celebrate the “great slurry walls” which survived the attack as “the most dramatic element,” as “an engineering wonder constructed on bedrock foundations and designed to hold back the Hudson River” as the border of a new kind of cultural frontier. “The foundations,” he writes, “stand as eloquent as the Constitution itself asserting the durability of Democracy and the value of individual life.” To Libeskind, this foundation “is not only the story of tragedy, but also reveals the dimensions of life.” In fact, the terms ‘life,’ ‘hope,’ and ‘future’ continuously recur throughout his description of the proposed project. He closes with the following paragraph:

The sky will be home again to a towering spire of 1776 feet high, the “Gardens of the World.” Why gardens? Because gardens are a constant affirmation of life. A skyscraper rises above its predecessors, reasserting the pre-eminence of freedom and beauty, restoring the spiritual peak to the city, creating an icon that speaks to our vitality in the face of danger and our optimism in the aftermath of tragedy. Life victorious. (Libeskind)

Like the height of this skyscraper, the triumphantly defiant tone of Libeskind’s dictum is hard to top. Curiously enough, from the ruins of 9/11 Libeskind revitalizes the visionary utopian project called America as perpetual past, “a nostalgic trajectory passing through the promised land, the garden of Eden” (Vacker 3). Libeskind’s post-9/11 rhetoric thus performs a mimicry of America’s master narrative that leaves little room for ironic distance. Projecting spaces “within which no shadow will fall,” his project instead bespeaks a desire for new beginnings, for a tabula rasa space of signification, for a ‘ground zero’ indeed. And this longing persists even as Libeskind’s ‘master plan’ is being subjected to adjustments and alterations; in fact, the more monolithic and symmetrical structure by which Childs plans to displace the asymmetrical Freedom Tower Libeskind proposed may, on the level of aesthetics, turn back time in a more obvious manner. “[W]e are confident,” reported Matthew Higgins, chief operating officer of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, in 2003 “that Libeskind and Childs will design a Freedom Tower that will make the entire nation proud” (qtd. in Dunlap). And just as the debates around the reconstruction of Ground Zero seem to underlie that, as Vacker argues in his study Ground Zero in the Global Village, the “time-space coordinates for entrance into the new millennium” are being annihilated, that culture “is being reprogrammed not to enter the new millennium” (2, my emphasis), the—so-far failed—dressing of the wound gaping in Lower Manhattan is a symptom of the fact that, in cases of trauma, closure is hard to come by. And this is exactly what Spiegelman’s serial art embodies, in its own particular ways.

III. (Mis-)Reading Trauma, or: Repeated Acts of Failed Interpretation

“Everyone is subject to structural trauma,” writes LaCapra, “[b]ut, with regard to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial” (79). As the work of the son of survivors (of the Holocaust) and of a survivor (of 9/11), Spiegelman’s comic reminds us—like any other attempt to ‘cope’ with trauma in cultural discourse—that representation is first of all a matter of mediation and remediation. In fact, its insistent self-referentiality and intermediality make it hard, I think, to read In the Shadow of No Towers as “the record of a psychologically wounded survivor, trying to make sense of an event that overwhelmed and destroyed all his normal psychic devices” (Versluis 982). Such reading attests more to the reader’s desire to make trauma signify than to what the comic—as a transient genre “just right,” as Spiegelman has it, “for an end-of-the-world moment” (qtd. in Whitlock 967)—can manage to do. Thus, the very newspaper size of its colored plates (9.5 by 14 inches) rather embodies the media ecology in which the comic strip originally evolved. Moreover, throughout its fragmented narration In the Shadows of No Towers not only reanimates and repeats with a difference) figures from Rudolph Dirk’s The Katzenjammer Kids and George Herriman’s Krazy Kat, among other pre-texts, and thus recalls the history of the comic as a genre central to modernism and modernization and implicated in the shifting position of ethnic minorities: a form bound to new printing technologies and processes of serialization as well as the rise of film as the central medium of the twentieth century and the status of “old comic strips” as “vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the twentieth century” (Spiegelman qtd. in Versluis 990).16 Preceded by a two-page prose introduction by the artist, the ten pages of Spiegelman’s comic book are even supplemented by a two-page “cameo history of newspaper comics in the U.S., illustrated by reprints of original cartoon strips and plates” (Versluis 981). Whether such strategies may amount to “healing through quotation,” as Klaus Scherpe argues in a different, though related context (qtd. in Huysens, “Of Mice and Mimesis” 82), is yet another matter. It is curious, in this context, that one of the devices mediating this transformation of serialized visual images into moving pictures was the so-called traumatopie—also, perhaps more often, referred to as traumatopie—inaugrated by John A. Paris in 1825. Spiegelman does the reverse. He takes moving images, the television images which form the dominant visual narrative of the event, and transforms them into two-dimensional serial images centered on a single, symbolically as well as cognitively potent image.

By presenting a drawing of the burning towers on the second and third page, the comic literally puts at its center a—comparably crude—reproduction, in graphic design, of the visual effects of digital imagery. I would resist, though, reading this

16 The fact that Dirk’s Katzenjammer Kids, as Frahm’s insightful close readings of In the Shadow of No Towers reminds us, are themselves inspired by Wilhelm Busch’s Max and Moritz adds to the distance we travel in “representations of trauma.” Evidently, these distancing effects also take place in what Whitfield calls “a global network of sequential art” (969) that involves transnational encounters and, in this context, the German intertext, of course, carries particular resonances.
image autobiographically, as Karen Espiritu does. Taking her cue from Spiegelman, who, by claiming that this image had been “burned into the inside of [his] eyelids” (qtd. in Espiritu 188), offers us a metaphor of traumatic memory at best, Espiritu sees this image lying “at the core of Spiegelman’s traumatic experience” (188). However, other—less literal—interpretations may come to mind. Certainly, the recurrent image of the almost collapsing tower, on the one hand, acknowledges that, as Jean Baudrillard has it, “the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image” (28-29). Or as Žižek argues in Welcome to the Desert of the Real (2002): “we were all forced to experience what ‘the compulsion to repeat’ and jouissance beyond the pleasure principle are: we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated ad nauseam, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was jouissance at its purest” (12). On the other hand, the very porousness and simplicity of Spiegelman’s image also foregrounds the limits of representation and the ways in which his “slow-motion diary” acknowledges these limits (Spiegelman n. pag.).

From the perspective of recent trauma discourse, the image of the tower which insistently recurs throughout the book and which Spiegelman calls “glowing bones” (n. pag.) may well be read as a trace of a wound “that cannot be reduced to thematic content,” a trace that “stubbornly persists in bearing witness” (Caruth qtd. in Leys 269). At the same time, we may also see it foregrounding how human cognition necessarily reduces the technological complexities of mediation and crystallizes processes of perception and memory into iconic markers which trigger emotional responses (as well as how modernist aesthetics actually self-referentially enact and foreground these processes). In this way, Spiegelman’s comic offers us a kind of afterimage which continues to appear in our vision after the exposure to the original image has ceased and thus stages—or mimics in slow motion—the same persistence of vision which the traumatotope used to generate its effects. The artist also engages what Leys calls “the pathos of the literal” cherished by a certain ‘school’ of trauma discourse which holds that some violence and suffering bypasses representation, imprinting itself directly or “literally” on the mind. Assuming that “massive trauma precludes all representation,” Caruth, among others, argues that “there occurs an undistorted, material and [...] literal registration of the traumatic event that, dissociated from normal mental processes of cognition, cannot be known or represented but returns belatedly in the form of ‘flashbacks,’ traumatic nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Leys 266).

With reference to Spiegelman’s Maus and its “modernist techniques of self-reflexivity, self-irony, ruptures in narrative time and highly complex sequencing and montaging,” Huysse, by contrast, speaks of “mimetic approximation” (“Of Mice and Mimesis” 70, 72; qtd. in Versluis 988) or “Angleichung,” which, for Huysse, “is precisely not identification or simple compulsion” (“Of Mice and Mimesis” 79). We may, of course, sympathize with Huysse’s attempt to make the “Adornoan category of mimesis [...] productive in a reading of Holocaust remembrance” (80) and with his resistance against what, in the year 2000, he considered “the recent revival of an aesthetic sublime and its dogmatic anti-representational stance” (68-69). The question that remains, though, is whether it is modernist techniques—Verslui’s appropriately refers to In the Shadow of No Towers as a “modernist collage”; Huysse speaks of “irony, shock, black humor, even cynicism” “new narrative and figurative strategies” (81)—which mimetically approximate trauma; or whether, due to the emergence of conceptions of trauma at a certain moment in cultural history, that is, during the nineteenth century, we have in fact come to correlate trauma with an aesthetics and style that emerged at the same time. And are the “urgency” and “formal excess” (Verslui 989) we detect in tales of trauma such as in Spiegelman’s comix a property of the tales being told? Or, alternately, are they rather projections of our own complicated desire for the telling of traumatic tales?

It is perhaps too simplistic to read, as Verslui does, “the broken-form of the narrative as [a] mirror image of [Spiegelman’s] consternation.” Versluis’s claim that “[the fragmentary presentation serves as objective correlative for the author’s scrambled state of mind,” as “a direct, in-your-face impression of extreme confusion and perplexity” (989) reduces trauma to what Katalin Orbán calls “a convenient plot for structuring the representation [...] of September 11” (79). Instead, by foregrounding mediation and media history, Spiegelman’s recent work on U.S.-American “post-traumatic culture” (Kirby Farrell) acknowledges trauma’s double status as an “experienced event” (Farrell qtd. in Ball 18) and, as an “imaginary locus” (Ball 18), an “enabling fiction” (Farrell qtd. in Ball 18), “a cultural trope that,” as Ball has it, “structures public attention, even as it dissolves into a species of cliché” (16). “I live on the outskirts of Ground Zero,” Spiegelman lets us know, “and first saw it all live—unmediated,” while also confessing: “Disaster is my Muse.” Having “[n]ew traumas [...] compete with still-fresh wounds” (introduction, n. pag.) and “trauma pile [...] over trauma” (5), Spiegelman’s panels in fact poke fun at the current obsession with trauma while also enacting the very hyperbole that LaCapra considers “the discursive symptomatic of, and perhaps necessary affective response to, the impact of trauma” (xi). The verb ‘to pile’ invests the term trauma with a spatial materiality and concreteness, suggesting that we could just ‘reach out and touch’ trauma. Likewise the word ‘wound’ fleshes out the abstract concept of trauma, while being likewise misleading, as Spiegelman himself seems to suggest. By reprinting the 11 September 1901 front page of the New York newspaper The World with its headline “President’s Wound Re-opened” on the flyleaf, the artist may certainly recall “another, now largely forgotten (but

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17 In Kaplan’s argument, by contrast, the sudden absence of the Twin Towers and the gap they left in the New World skyline are themselves presented as a trope of trauma. Her further reflections on their absence exemplify how imprecise and speculative essayistic discussion of trauma can get. Kaplan reads this gap as “a space full of horror as well as heroism. Their [the towers’] visual absence was traumatic,” she begins and continues, “as Lacan’s petit objet a, “as “castration,” and “the infant’s loss of the mother” (12). On the other hand, she claims, “the ‘gap’ was filled with other images—of burning people jumping of the towers, of firemen [...]-” (13). As we read on, all distinctions of individual and cultural trauma evaporate: “The images were part of the traumatic symptom already evident in the media’s constant repetition of the Towers being struck. Given trauma’s peculiar visibility as a psychic disorder, this event seemed to feed trauma by being so highly visual it happening” (13). Kaplan also finds “unconscious residues of the traumatic situation” in the debates of the reconstruction of Ground Zero (139). At the same time, she comes to favor a threefold approach to trauma that acknowledges the significance of dissociation (as Caruth does), psychoanalysis (with reference to the argument made by Radstone), and neuroscience (with reference to van der Kolk) (38).
repeatedly re-enacted) collective trauma: the shooting of a president, in this case William McKinley” (Versluys 982). At the same time, though, focused on a surgical procedure which removed stitches in order to clean the bullet wound McKinley had suffered, this article also illuminates the limits of the wound metaphor: physical wounds can be attended to, psychical wounds are much less easily located. Thus Spiegelman certainly does not “interpret[] history as a concatenation of shocks, as a never-ending series of wounds that will not heal and keep festering,” as Versluys claims (981). Rather, his comic foregrounds how metaphors such as wound and trauma actually edit our sense of historical temporality by aligning highly distinct historical moments. Spiegelman’s own strategy, throughout the comic, to relate, on the one hand, moments of his and his family’s experiences on 11 September 2001 and, on the other, present a “savage satire” (Versluys 981) of the politics of the Bush administration until August 2003, may even suggest that metonymy is a more adequate figure to mark this particular moment in time.

Moreover, as Spiegelman’s *comix* foregrounds the processes of remediation and intermediality, it attests to the continuous shifts in our conceptions of trauma, to their function as “weapons of mass displacement” (9), if I may appropriate Spiegelman’s trope for the work of post-9/11 political rhetoric. In fact, Spiegelman quite literally acknowledges that, as Alexander puts it, “there is an interpretive grid through which all ‘facts’ about [cultural] trauma are mediated, emotionally, cognitively, and morally. This grid,” Alexander holds, “has a supra-individual, cultural status; it is symbolically structured and sociologically determined. No [cultural] trauma interprets itself” (“Moral Universals” 201). And Spiegelman offers us one such historically specific interpretatory grid that clearly calls into question the current paradigms of representing trauma.

More specifically, Spiegelman’s grid makes much out of the fact that trauma as an experience escapes temporality, “is defined by temporal unlocatability,” as Caruth puts it (qtd. in Lys 271), and translates into “time standing still” (Spiegelman 4), into ‘freeze frames,’ so to speak. Mediated by Spiegelman in part by a fragmentary aesthetics of collage and montage, this mode of temporality is aligned, albeit in a multiply mediated manner, with modernism and its attempt to create a “simultaneous order” (T.S. Eliot) and thus proximate to poetry (and poetics) rather than narrative (and narratology) or “counter-narrative,” for that matter, as Versluys has it (980). Inviting us, at times, to read and follow the images from right to left, thus evoking Arabic as well as Hebrew, contributes to this irritation of traditional (Western) notions of narrative continuity.

The very simplicity, iconicity, and seriality which characterizes the comic as a form of sequential visual art moreover makes it “well suited [...] for dealing in abstractions” (Spiegelman 1) by images of embodiment. Physiologically, traumatic experiences cause stimulus satiation which blocks connections between neocortex and other regions of the brain indispensable for information storage. The net effect of such an overflow of stimuli is dissociative amnesia, a state of mind in which part of the past seems dead, yet may come back to life with a vengeance anytime, triggered by images, sounds, and smells.8 Or as LaCapra has it:

LaCapra therefore emphasizes the importance of the visual to account for “looks and gestures,” “facial expressions,” and the “body language” (xiv) in survivor testimony. Spiegelman dares to mock these similar claims, for instance, when he projects the “somatic imprint of trauma” (Orbán 81) as a kind of electric shock (fig. 1). Presenting a family (father, mother, kid, and cat) lounging in a ritualized position in front of the TV on September 10 (first panel), on September 11 (second panel), and on an unspecified day post-9/11, when the calendar (which marks time as a process) has been displaced by the American flag (a translational sign), Spiegelman signals trauma by a cliché, easily legible generic marker: having every family member move closer to the unbelievable images aired on September 11, their hair frizzled and standing on end, everybody has already leaned back to their original position in the last panel, yet remains “on a permanent bad-hair day,” as Orbán puts it (80). Evidently, this sequence plays with generic conventions of repetition and difference to suggest that, on the one hand, September 11 was a “day nothing much changed” (Dobson) while, on the other hand, emotionally everything did change, even if this transformation—the emotional shock following a stressful event—lacks adequate forms of representation. In this way, Spiegelman does not aim at representing trauma adequately, as some commentators claim. Rather, his images ironize the very notion that such appropriate mediation is possible in the first place.

—See, for instance, “Dissociative Amnesia.”

8 Fig. 1: Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (detail). From *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman, copyright © 2004 by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Thus Spiegelman’s seeming attempts at mimetic maintain an ironic distance. Even if the “haptic visibility and the materiality of the book” is, as Katarina Orbán argues, a central dimension of Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* (72) which argues the physical impact of a deeply stressing experience, it does so in highly mediated manners. The same holds true for the ways in which the comic foregrounds the offactory dimensions of traumatic memory, recalling the father’s references to the disagreeable smell of Auschwitz in *MAUS.* 9/11 is “all live—unmediated” and “indescribable” (Spiegelman 1), but it is remembered as a
smell. Similarly, in his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Jonathan Safran Foer does not simply create a link between the Dresden bombings, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, and the September 11 attacks. Rather he affiliates mediations of these events, which in turn trigger processes of memory, including source confusion. Focusing on perception and cognition, both Spiegelman and Foer thus make an utterly significant distinction which is lacking, for instance, when Kaplan recalls that the gear of National Guard soldiers cordoning off Ground Zero reminded her “of World War II”: “The crush of people pressing around me made me feel as claustrophobic as did the crowds jamming into the underground shelters during my childhood” (7). Unlike Kaplan’s simile, which collapses one historical event into another, the focus on the mediation of memory, in Spiegelman and Foer, emphasizes the role of sense perception and the limits of representation. In other words: In contrast to “[t]rauma theorists,” who, according to Radstone, “associate trauma not with the effects of triggered associations but with the ontologically unbearable nature of the event itself” (qtd. in Kaplan 35), artists focus on how these effects of (non-recuperable) traumatic experiences translate or, for that matter, do not translate into cultural practice. In fact, part of Spiegelman’s “visual alternative” to the familiar loop of mediated images of the event is, as Orbán convincingly shows, to methodically work into his account of the events “a number of things he did not see,” thus delineating how one can be haunted by images one did not witness (73).

Ultimately, Spiegelman’s comic pinpoints both the limits of representation and what Barbara Johnson, with reference to the primacy of trauma for psychoanalysis called “the trauma of interpretation.” Psychoanalysis, as Johnson puts it, is the primal scene it seeks. It is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation […] the traumatic deferred interpretation not of an event, but as an event that never took place as such. (142)

Like psychoanalysis itself, Linda Belau argues, any attempt to engage with trauma therefore engages in “a failed act of reading” (par. 23). And it is this failure—acknowledged by some (e.g. Claude Lanzmann) and strategically ignored by others (e.g. Kaplan, if I read her correctly)—which fires further repetition or, rather, invites further interpretation. As Derrida wrote: “[w]hat is terrible about ‘September 11,’ what remains ‘infinite’ in this wound is that we do not know how to describe, identify, and even name it” (qtd. in Versluys 987). Trauma thus is not so much “the impossibility of narration,” as Aleida Assmann has it (30). It foregrounds the fact that our repeated acts of reading trauma are approximations that cannot but fail; that’s why we keep reading, interpreting, repeating, producing a difference every time we do. The term trauma thus offered one meaning to the events of 11 September 2001 while at the same time resisting closure and suggesting that we will have to repeatedly return to the ruins of Ground Zero.

Part of the traumatic dimension of 9/11 may be just that: our failure to interpret ‘correctly,’ adequately what actually happened on 11 September 2001—locally as well as globally. However, Baudrillard may still have been mistaken when he claimed that “[w]e try retrospectively to impose some meaning on it, to find some kind of interpretation. But there is none” (qtd. in Wilson 101). After all, our approximations have produced a matrix in which trauma works as a model of identity that is ultimately exclusive and closed-off. And where language ended, post-9/11 politics could easily have its way. This is why, ultimately, the rhetoric of the unrepresentable remains a risky business.

**Works Cited**


