



PROJECT MUSE®

The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema: Violence Void Visualization
ed. by Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek, and Julia B. Köhne (review)

Jason Crouthamel

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 46, Number 2, Winter
2016, pp. 86-89 (Review)

FILM & HISTORY

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/643312>

Perhaps even more disturbing, after the Vichy government and French police rounded up Jews in the infamous *Vel d'hiv* (July, 1942) to be sent to their deaths in concentration camps, is the persistence of anti-Semitism after the war. Particularly striking in the world of cinema are the comments of veteran director and scriptwriter Claude Autant-Lara on his election to the Academy of Beaux-Arts in 1989 (the academy later disowned him). Autant-Lara imagined Jewish persecution in much the same way as Céline, his most admired author, who published brutally anti-Semitic tracts in the 1930s and escaped to Sigmaringen with Pétain, Laval and their Nazi protectors as the Second World War drew to a close. They were accompanied by Robert Le Vigan, a popular movie actor in the 30s and 40s. He had served in Paris under the Occupation as a radio announcer for the Nazis, spewing racist propaganda that targeted Jews. (It was in France, perhaps understandably, that Holocaust deniers first appeared.) In addition, Frey reads Godard's *Pierrot le fou* as a mash-up of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, and uses it to illustrate how left-wing and right-wing discourses come together in French anti-Semitic thinking as in perhaps no other prejudice.

Frey admits that his detailed discussions of specific, well-known French films and the events that surround them examine a mythic content that is often subtle and open to other readings. However, he makes a strong case for the political mythologies that he uncovers. He has given both scholars and aficionados of French cinema a well-researched and fascinating study.

Judith Sarnecki, Lawrence University

Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek and
Julia B. Köhne, Editors
*The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema:
Violence Void Visualization*
Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014

Historians and film theorists have lately produced path-breaking scholarship on the impact of 20th century traumas on cinema. Anton Kaes, for example, recently explored the Great War's impact on Weimar cinema and broke ground in revealing how cinema gave expression to trauma and violence for a wounded nation. Films, even those not directly dealing with the war, provided a mirror for a shell-shocked interwar German society reeling from the trauma of total war.¹³ Similarly, *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema*, an interdisciplinary collection of essays edited by Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek and Julia B. Köhne, explores the function of cinema in visualizing violence for traumatized societies. Taking a transnational, interdisciplinary, and cross-genre perspective, this volume focuses on documentary and feature films of the 1960s-2000s to explore two central questions: (1) which modes of cinematic representation enable visualization of shattering experiences with violence?; and (2) what historical insights and cultural perspectives into trauma can be found in film?

The central argument that runs through this collection's diverse, but cohesive set of essays is that cinematic representations of violence have the capacity to "reenact, reactivate, or reproduce" traumatic situations, thus

¹³ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

playing out 'trauma' in a mediated manner, which, by restaging the past, can be culturally cathartic.(3). Unlike any other medium, film can both activate and deconstruct traumatic wounds and transport narratives of trauma into the national psyche. Film preserves and replays trauma in a form that societies can absorb. When traumatic historical and individual experiences are otherwise too devastating for cultures to remember, cinema, especially horror cinema, becomes a site through which individuals and societies can explore traumatic experiences. However, violence in cinema can also potentially impede coming to terms with traumatic history, as images and memories become simplified or appropriated to serve collective national or political agendas.

The first section of the volume focuses on images of horror in trauma cinema. It consists of three essays and explores connections between historical traumas, national wounds, and the depiction of traumatic violence. The first contribution, by Thomas Weber, examines Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), which, Weber argues, employs an aesthetic of stress and alienation that connects to repressed traumatic memories. Haneke's characters and milieu are symbolically linked to the French Resistance and the Algerian War, forcing the audience to encounter repressed individual and cultural memories. Michael Elm's essay on films by Roman Polanski, including *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), explores similar themes. Elm argues that Polanski's films, which draw on his own traumatic experiences in the Holocaust, are essentially a reenactment of repressed traumas that are too painful to deal with directly. Christiane-Marie Abu Sarah examines various American horror films like *Flesh Eaters* (1964) and *Blood Creek* (2009) to

argue that the pervasive iconography of Nazi villains, which symbolize evil in its rawest form, is actually loaded with symbolism that is dynamic and ever-changing, enabling audiences to project and confront diverse individual and cultural interpretations of trauma and evil through images of horror.

The volume's second section focuses on representations of trauma and horror in a broad range of American films that invite audience to see violence as a coping mechanism, a means of expressing rage and revenge, and the cause of identity loss and memory repression. Dania Hückmann explores fantasies of rage and resistance within the context of the Holocaust as reimagined by Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). According to Hückmann, the Jewish cinema owner Shosanna's act of revenge against Hitler taps into contemporary cultural fantasies that reflect a desire to restage the trauma of the Second World War. Daniel Müller examines how narratives of individual trauma in *Source Code* (2011), where the main character's experience with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by combat in Afghanistan, invites audiences to confront the origins, but also mechanisms of denial and repression, that are played out in the film's narrative style of dislocation.

Themes of memory repression are further developed in the third section, which focuses on cinematic tools used by West and East German filmmakers for coping with the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Postwar German films have often reflected difficulties in coming to terms with the traumatic past, and they reflect historiographical debates over responsibility, victimhood and the politics of memory. Jeanne Bindernagel analyzes the transmission of guilt from the wartime generation to their children in Thomas

Harlen's *Wundkanal* (1984). While the younger generation is haunted by the shadow of their father's past, the film fails to find a path for coming to terms with psychological trauma. Pablo Fontana examines films created by DEFA, East Germany's state-owned film production studio, which by the 1960s, with a loosening of censorship in the communist countries, was able to explore more complex representations of Germany's traumatic past. Fontana demonstrates that while East German films revealed subjective traumas of individuals who survived war and the Holocaust, these traumas were nevertheless politically appropriated to suggest East German victimization under the conflated forces of fascism and Anglo-American bombings.

The last two sections of the volume explore representations of violence in Israeli and Palestinian films dealing with the Yom-Kippur-War, wars in Lebanon and conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. Peter Grabher analyzes Israeli filmmakers of Palestinian descent who struggle to document the subjective experiences and existential turmoil of Palestinians living in Israel. Like their subjects, filmmakers such as Ula Tabari and Elia Suleiman face the difficulty of responding to trauma while at the same time trying to develop identities, both aesthetic and political, in the midst of this conflict. Sandra Meiri treats the often repressed subject of sexual violence and the ways in which trauma is passed on by Holocaust survivors to the 'second generation'. Meiri argues that the Israeli film *Burning Mooki* (2008), in which a woman who suffered rape in the camps re-enacts her trauma with her son, highlights how trauma inflicted in the Holocaust was visited on subsequent generations. Raya Morag's essay complicates themes of gender and

violence by analyzing a new kind of protagonist in Israeli films that challenges feminist film critics: the female soldier who is also a perpetrator of violence. Morag argues that the female perpetrator of violence reflects tensions between masculine (as agents of militarized violence) and feminine (as outsiders victimized by sexism) experiences with war.

The editors have done a fine job organizing a diverse range of scholarship by cultural historians, film theorists, and specialists in trauma studies into a cohesive volume that offers new insights on trauma, violence and memory for a wide audience of scholars. Their introduction expertly synthesizes these cross-national, diverse contributions into a coherent whole that integrates analysis of film aesthetics, narrative, historical context, and cultural impact. From the perspective of a cultural historian specializing in trauma and memory, this volume makes a particularly strong contribution to scholarship addressing tensions between individual versus collective memories. It convincingly demonstrates that cinema, which perpetually re-stages and transmits trauma and violence, is perhaps culture's most dynamic and important conveyer of memory and a vital means of integrating traumatic histories into individual and national identities. While the language of film is uniquely equipped for uncovering subjective, repressed traumas through images and narratives that reveal subtexts, symbols and layers of memory, it is also one of culture's most vital 'containers' of collective memory. At the same time, as the contributions in this volume demonstrate, cinema can also be used to suppress or conceal subjective memories of trauma, and replace them with collective narratives that allow societies to fantasize, experience

catharsis, or integrate their own memories and identities into a nationalized or politicized agenda. This excellent volume succeeds at exploring both the intentions of filmmakers who produce images of violence, and the context in which such images are received by diverse audiences. Specialists in film, history, and cultural studies will benefit from its balanced and nuanced examination of the cultural impact of film and the significance of violence, as it is both reflected and refracted on the screen.

Jason Crouthamel
Grand Valley State University

Peter Lev
Twentieth Century-Fox: The Zanuck-Skouras Years, 1935–1965
University of Texas Press, 2013

In his most recent offering in film history, Peter Lev provides a compelling examination of Twentieth Century-Fox over a crucial thirty year period, from its 1935 beginning in the merger of two companies—Fox Film Corporation and Twentieth Century Pictures—to the smash success of *Sound of Music* in 1965. These thirty years take the company from its rise to becoming one of the most powerful Hollywood studios by the 1940s, through its difficulties over the 1950s, and into the volatile early 1960s. Lev's chronological scope covers how Fox managed the transition from Old to New Hollywood, as the system of major studios controlling the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures gave way to a less integrated, more fluid motion picture industry. He also demonstrates the impact of major historical events, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

A brief epilogue brings the story to 2011, but Lev's emphasis is on what he considers the "studio's golden age" of the 1940s (276).

Although relatively short as studio histories go, this book is ambitious. Most valuable is Lev's attention to both Twentieth Century-Fox's West and East Coast operations: the Hollywood production studio and the New York headquarters. He joins other film historians in recognizing the importance of going beyond a focus on motion pictures, the filmmakers, stars, and processes involved in production, and their reception by filmgoers to understand film companies more holistically. As Lev puts it, "the New York office took charge of corporate strategy, finances, government relations, distribution, exhibition, new technologies, and international relations. How could one write a history of a 'Hollywood' film company without including these functions?" (2) One way in which he carries out this dual approach is by interweaving the history of Fox with the biographies of the two men who dominated the company, as indicated by the book's subtitle, "the Zanuck-Skouras years." Best known is Darryl F. Zanuck. He was head of production from 1935 to 1956 and then until 1962 an independent producer distributing through Fox. Meanwhile, Spyros Skouras was president of the corporation for twenty of these years, from 1942 to 1962, and Zanuck succeeded him in that position.

Lev tells the fascinating story of the conflicts and collaborations between Zanuck and Skouras over these two decades. Their differences, including different experiences in the industry—Zanuck as a producer, Skouras as an exhibitor—and styles, were evident over these years. For instance, Zanuck had long been associated with making social problem films, whereas Skouras favored religious films. Zanuck