

## **VICTIMS' SYMPTOM: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Culture**

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### **What is a victim?**

The concept of the victim, usually in relation to the oppressor, has been analysed widely in literature on the subject, especially on its disciplinary intersection with studies on gender and sexual identity (or queer studies). Major theorists of the twentieth century have attempted to decode literary texts that speak directly about victimhood – texts that were prohibited or forgotten because of the prescriptive censorship of previous centuries, such as writings by the Marquis De Sade or the nineteenth century Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, as well as twentieth century French theorist Georges Bataille.<sup>i</sup> A wide interest in the obscure, perverse personal relationship that actually symptomises political relationships – both totalitarian and oppressive – has found its way into other interdisciplinary research. However, apart from examining the concepts of victim and oppressor, other detailed concepts have rarely been analysed.

Psychiatric (rather than psychoanalytical) diagnosis of neurosis, schizophrenia and psychosis has found its way into cultural studies; these conditions are analysed as cultural symptoms, disinfected of their clinical negative value, directly in the writings of French psychotherapist Guattari.<sup>ii</sup> They have become concepts that, on the one hand, have helped to prevent cultural condemnation of mental illness, showing that whole cultures and societies (can) display the same symptoms. But they have also opened the way to exploration of the innovative, lucid or obscure knowledge “of madness” that was previously censored.

On the other hand, they have also shown the cultural participation of producing symptoms in individuals. Whatever is defined as “behaviourally” or “mentally disturbed” and “mentally ill” is boomeranged back to society itself (minus some genetic predispositions), with the pressure of society on fragile individuals returned to the source.

### **What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?**

Although I am not a psychoanalyst but a media theorist and curator, I have dared to take a “hot” concept from the last few decades in the territories I come from (South Eastern Europe), a concept that has political and economic implications and therefore opens up a discourse. The concept, entitled Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – or PTSD – has been popularly named “Vietnam syndrome” or event specifically “torture syndrome”, “concentration camp syndrome”,

“psychosexual torture syndrome” or “Stockholm syndrome”. It is a clinical diagnosis describing a variety of symptoms that has a trigger in common: a trauma.<sup>iii</sup>

Indeed, trauma has been examined widely in the field of cultural analysis, especially in literature studies, but also in film studies, predominantly analysing Holocaust-related literary and movie production. These include analysis of formative narratives that use “flashbacks” to the traumatic event, with its specific oppressive time looping, but also symptoms of PTSD such as denial and unwillingness to talk about the traumatic event. However, the clinical concept of PTSD has not been applied.

PTSD has a more specific, usually political, definition that may not be applicable in all cases mentioned in the previous analysis. First of all, it does not distinguish between the victim and the oppressor, but treats everyone with symptoms as patients. Furthermore, PTSD is institutionally framed; it includes the political and also the social and economic aspect of victimhood. This depends on the interest of the state or international human rights organisations against torture, as well as interest in the effect of trauma on direct or collateral victims in terms of their social functioning. It also depends on the negative aspects of perceived danger for society, where danger to oneself is also subsumed. Often suicides or mass murders, combined with suicides as a result of PTSD, can continue terrorising the environment and reflect the trauma back to society after a traumatic event such as war has finished. The inversion of roles may happen almost at any time.

Another part of the political and economic meaning of PTSD is, as forensic psychiatrists warn, the influence of “secondary gain”, such as war pensions or taking advantage of the health system. This can produce exaggeration or even simulation of PTSD, which becomes a barrier for the forensic evaluation, putting great pressure on the forensic psychiatrist. Fake PTSD has different sets of apparatuses to gain different profits. In contemporary society, PTSD has become an “institutionalised victim”, something that society may be afraid of.

In this text, I intend to elaborate further on the possibility of applying the psycho-traumatic diagnosis of PTSD to a broader field of culture, especially to the realm of media theory, analysing the recipient or the public. In the first part of the text, I focus on the precise use of the concept of the “victim” through the quite disturbing lens of queer studies, coming to terms with the topic of “self-victimisation” and a cultural need for victimisation and institutionalisation of victims as mentioned by Beauvoir, who was referring to the behaviour of “saints”. From there, I will come back to my original field of media studies.

## **Empathy Quest**

In her writings, the French feminist author Simone de Beauvoir drew our attention to the socially accepted inverse victim-role.<sup>iv</sup> A consecrated victim, she noted, could be a tyrant as well. Reading of saints as exhibitionists who are playing upon our guilty conscience and by it divinising themselves has destabilised our notion of “heroes” as “moral paradigms”. This concept has actually been transferred to the field of performance studies. Bataille has also subversively elaborated on the political connotations of the role of the victim, analysing the perverse enjoyment of the role and its actual sadistic power principle. Victims can engage in and even enjoy their passive aggression and the moral responsibility for their own pain, thus displacing the source of pain, victimising the other.

What can be deduced from the writings of both authors is the rhetoric of the “speech of the victim”. Once we recognise this speech, we can interpret a variety of writings around us, using it in a matter of style rather than content. Victims have culturally replaced the role of heroes, freelancing victims, to become more anonymous and socially condensed. Victims have become whole nations, religions or social groups.<sup>v</sup> Still it is only in media studies and political studies that the research of such speech appeared, especially in regard to recent US politics. “Victim’s speech” is used for economic and military gain, becoming a simple pattern that shows itself easily inverted while emotionally direct; to justify attacking a country it is enough to state – “we are their victims” and ask for compassion rather than reason.

## **Collateral Victims**

With a destabilisation of the concept of the victim, it has almost become impossible to decide “who is the victim of whom”, and which is the original trauma. This also applies to the radical trauma of PTSD.

One of main parameters of PTSD research has been focused on the assessment of the “prevalence of the trauma that ranges outside the normal experience in the population”, producing a feeling of horror, fear or helplessness in the face of a traumatic event, or even if not – expressing anger and shame for not experiencing horror at the first encounter.<sup>vi</sup> However, nothing has been said about the effect that media images or discussion can have on the population in general. Is the continuous drip feeding of war images in contemporary society possibly creating the same levels of fear and paranoia on the general population? If so – trauma can be mediated.

But is that news? We were warned by education experts that violence on TV can influence the behaviour of children, especially children exposed to “in your house, too” horror fiction... And

surely, we know the role-call of nightmares has been influenced by the terrifying figures of media horrors, too. Fears and stress, paranoia, images of wars, death, corpses on TV – all these have an impact, slowly but surely mixing real and simulated disturbance... or more precisely, mixing the real and political speech.

### **Trauma at a Distance**

If mediated images can produce symptoms of PTSD, the problem becomes: who is deciding to produce these images and why? Are the people who are providing us with such imagery as guilty as the people in non-simulated reality? Is this reality having the same effect? Phenomenologically, it seems so. Wars can be conducted simultaneously in reality and on TV. Speaking about war, then, immediately introduces its discourse, creating a meaning of war that it does not have in reality. It forces us to choose a side at least, even when we are not affected by the war in real life. By choosing sides – we are actually finding ourselves in the middle of the war itself.

### **Images of War**

There is a difference between how the media reports on war in peaceful societies versus in war-affected societies. Usually denying the cruel reality of war images, citizens of countries that are affected by war do not have a need to watch wars on TV. Some authors refer to these societies as “erotic”, for different reasons: these citizens are more inclined to live in the moment due to the direct threat of death and there is proof of higher birth rates during the period of conflict. At the same time, cultures that reside in peaceful societies, whether they enjoy that peace or not, are more compelled to watch images of war, and are accordingly identified as “thanatic” – disengaged, less concerned with mortality, behaving as if they would live forever, but also having “colder” social relationships.<sup>vii</sup> Still, outside of poetic description, there might be a commonsense reason there – it is a trauma that prevents a direct confrontation with imagery for some.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, traumatised memory tends to return, while consumption mimics the same repetition.<sup>ix</sup>

But why is there a desire by societies not affected by war to integrate this war imagery into their lives? The algorithm of real and virtual seems to be out of proportion to each other. As the Dutch media theorists [Adilkno](#) have noted, violence in the media increases as the media becomes more distant from the body.<sup>x</sup> So the more distant the danger is, the greater the need to be afraid, to feel alive and to separate from the “deathness”.<sup>xi</sup> Still, are they safe from being traumatised? And what happens when the tolerance of such imagery increases?

Can our media society be affected by mediated PTSD?<sup>xii</sup> And what is the relation to the real victim?

### **Numbers of Corpses**

A discussion about my text "[War profiteers in art](#)", which was held in parallel on two email lists/networks in September 2007, talked about the use of war imagery at the Venice Biennale exhibition curated by Robert Storr and has opened up a space for analysis of the media use of victims, or re-victimisation of the victim.<sup>xiii</sup> Namely, a great number of artworks displayed war images, although their authors had no original experience of the war itself. This "war tourism," recognised by Susan Sontag, has grown into a kind of mass "war postcards" consumption.<sup>xiv</sup>

The text was written as the Bosnian city of Srebrenica was fighting for victim status. Srebrenica, which fell under the media spotlight during the time of the massacre that was recognised as the largest genocide in Europe after the Holocaust, has lost its media attention now. Images of other conflicts have become more important, while Srebrenica's trauma is recycled constantly through mediated imagery.

There is no copyright on war imagery, of course. However, there is the original trauma of the victim, though it has nothing to do with the "speech of the victim" and needs of contemporary society to enjoy these images on TV.<sup>xv</sup> It is not about numbers of people, at all, it seems – but the discourse, which surely can have consequences. After all, it is not the event but the intensity and duration that produces PTSD, resulting in a coherent refusal of such imagery in the end, with this denial as a symptom. These formal political and economic consequences include faking PTSD in order to gain war pensions, apartments or even to act as an excuse for unacceptable behaviour.

### **Internet: medium for therapy?**

The mass media, due to its ownership, produces fake victims in the sense of the explanation of war, where usually the aggressor comes as the first victim to explain the revolt and aggression, inverting the position. Contrary to state-owned media or international political agencies, the Internet is said to be an effective therapeutic tool for a variety of symptoms and disorders, for its displaced, non-personal, but direct connection. However, as has occurred since the early days of the Internet, fake identities are appearing too. For example, one psychiatrist assumed the identity of a woman experiencing the trauma of a car crash with severe invalidity.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Victims' Symptom

Victims' Symptom (PTSD and Culture) will be produced online, in several phases/layers; including documentation, an online debate featuring theoretical texts using this one as a starting point, and finally a series of commissioned artworks.

Between the "confession of a victim" appearing in blogs and the "role of the victim" appearing in the mass media that treats people not as individuals but as illustrations for mass daily war reporting, totally disinterested in their individuality, the project serves as a shift (in the curatorial sense), tunneling through different information.

The project will connect artists and theorists in online discussions on various platforms, as well as anyone else interested debating concepts of the victim, victimisation and the institutionalisation of victims.<sup>xvii</sup> Its goal is therefore to de-construct and de-activate the emancipated "third agent" construction of victims by the media, which acts as an intermediary between the different sides of war.

The project will be organised around commissioned artworks that will serve as triggers and be accompanied by a blog space for discussion and writing by theorists, artists and other interested individuals. An open call will be sent out inviting individuals to participate in the discussion, as well as inviting artists to contribute to a database of artworks dealing with some of the following topics:

- Why is an image of a dead body meaningful in some societies while in others it loses its capacity to provoke anger or compassion, rather serving to produce attitudes?
- Why does the mass media prefer to talk about numbers of corpses, calculating them morbidly, instead of the victim's status? Does the number of victims make any difference?
- Is there a sophist paradox between a number and a mass of victims? At what point can we start talking about genocide and mass murder?<sup>xviii</sup> And in what ways are we affected by these events?

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<sup>i</sup> Among the most crucial are writings of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. See: Barthes, R. (1980) *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Paris, Editions du Seuil. Deleuze, G., L. v. Sacher-Masoch, et al. (1989) *Masochism*. New York, Zone; London: MIT Press [distributor]. Foucault, M. and R. Hurley (1979) *The history of sexuality*. London, Allen Lane. Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York, Vintage Books.

<sup>ii</sup> For example: Guattari, F. and G. Deleuze (1996) The First Positive Task of SchizoAnalysis, *The Guattari Reader*. G. Genosko. Oxford, Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers Ltd: 77-95.

<sup>iii</sup> "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing life-threatening events such as war, military combat, terrorist attacks, serious accidents or violent

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personal physical assaults, rape etc.” Kožarić– Kovac–Dragić; Pivac, Nela (2007) Novel approaches to the diagnosis and treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder; in: *The Integration and Management of Traumatized People after Terrorist Attack* / Begec, Suat (ed.) Amsterdam : IOS Press, 2007. pp. 13-40. See more on [PTSD](#) in Wikipedia.

<sup>iv</sup> Beauvoir, S. d. and H. M. Parshley (1949 rep: 1968) *The second sex*. London, Jonathan Cape Ltd.

<sup>v</sup> “Epidemiological studies show a high prevalence of post traumatic stress disorder in the general population and specific groups exposed to traumatic events (survivors of war trauma, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc.)” Kožarić– Kovac–Dragić (ibid).

<sup>vi</sup> Kožarić– Kovac–Dragić (ibid).

<sup>vii</sup> On eroticisation of death and thanatisation of eros see Bataille, G. (1989) *The Tears of Eros*. San Francisco, City Lights Books.

<sup>viii</sup> Also being a part of the PTSD. The major symptoms – anxiety, repeated nightmares, flash-backs, fear reactions, phobic avoiding of events that are connected with traumatic experience.

<sup>ix</sup> An interesting artwork from this perspective is Eduardo Kac’s intravenous injecting of photographs, or Maria Grazio’s destruction of his own face from the family album while in an asylum.

<sup>x</sup> Adilkno (1999). *The Media Archive*. Amsterdam, Autonomedia.

<sup>xi</sup> A good description of separation from deathness is given by contemporary feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva: “No, as it is true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this deathment, this shit is what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am on the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop on that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – cadere, cadaver.” See Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. New York; Guildford, Columbia University Press.

<sup>xii</sup> Slavich.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ana Peraica: [War profiteers in art](#) (Venice Biennale 2007), comments on [Nettime](#), comments on [Vlemma wordpress](#) (in Greek).

<sup>xiv</sup> Sontag, S. (2003) *Regarding the pain of others*. London, Hamish Hamilton.

<sup>xv</sup> In a discussion about war images between a Sarajevo curator Asja Mandić Suzana Milevska from Macedonia and myself, an interesting argument was raised by Milevska, issuing the copyright of images of death (on “unspeakable” trauma of war or “the taboo” which by Freud’s definition is on the one hand “sacred”, “consecrated”, and on the other “uncanny”, “dangerous”, “forbidden” and “unclean”) see Freud, S., J. S. (ed), et al. (1950) *Totem and Taboo*. Some points of Agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics, New York London, W.W Norton & Company. This formative aspect, of course, has nothing to do with ethics of “touching wounds” of others.

<sup>xvi</sup> See “Identity, Community and the Internet” by Duncan Timms at <http://www.odeluce.stir.ac.uk/docs/Identitypaper26Aug.pdf> for more information on this particular issue.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Victimisation in [Victimology](#) (Wikipedia).

<sup>xviii</sup> Especially in regard to the cases of Vukovar and Srebrenica.