History, Memory, Trauma

LAN 490.11, Literary Research in the Foreign Languages, Spring 2017

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Course Description: The legacies of genocide, slavery, and state terrorism produce “traumatic histories,” that is, collective memories of extreme violence that refuse to recede into the past as ordinary events do. Traumatic experiences interrupt the flow of narrative time and even history itself. By what means do writers of memoir and testimony nevertheless narrate their traumatic stories? What literary strategies are employed by fiction writers and playwrights who attempt to represent violent histories? What stylistic features mark the cinema and poetry of disaster? To answer these and other questions, we will begin our course by studying theories proposed by Freud and more recent thinkers that try to account for the effects of trauma on history, memory and language. Then we will discuss films and literary texts, in various genres and from around the world, that, despite the inherent difficulties involved in representing trauma, find innovative ways to remember and confront specific histories of violence. In addition, we will read exemplary critical essays to deepen our understanding of the primary texts under study but also to provide us with models for our own critical essays, for which we will learn current techniques for carrying out scholarly research in the humanities.

Required Texts (8 books + 3 films provided by the instructor)
Jean Améry, At the Mind’s Limits (essays)
Cathy Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory (essays)
Charlotte Delbo, Auschwitz and After (memoir)
Ariel Dorfman, Death and the Maiden (play) & Roman Polanski, Death and the Maiden (film)
Atom Egoyan, The Sweet Hereafter (film: provided by the instructor)
Sindiwe Magona, Mother to Mother (novel)
Cynthia Ozick, The Shawl (novel)
Alain Resnais & Marguerite Duras, Hiroshima mon amour (film: provided by the instructor)
Art Spiegelman, Maus I & Maus II (graphic novel)

Course Requirements
Class preparation and participation (15% of the course grade): It is essential that you read all assigned texts carefully before we meet, and that you are prepared to discuss them in class. You are obliged to actively engage in the collective work of the seminar by sharing your ideas.

Three papers (15%, 25%, and 35% of the course grade): Preliminary information is below; more details will be provided later.
   --Paper 1 (due Feb. 15): a 3-4 page discussion trauma theory.
   --Paper 2 (due Apr. 5): a 5-6 page discussion in which trauma theory is applied to a text or film on our syllabus; the page limit does not include notes and bibliography.
   --Final Project, i.e., Paper 3 (due May 10): a 10-12 page research paper in which trauma theory is applied to a text or film NOT on our syllabus; the page limit does not include notes and bibliography.

Oral presentation/Mock Conference Paper (10% of the course grade): a 20-minute talk about your final project (paper 3), presented on April 26 or May 3.
Jan. 18, Course Introduction: History, Memory, Trauma

Jan. 25, Theorizing Trauma (I)
Cathy Caruth, “Preface,” (vii-ix); “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” (3-12); “Recapturing the Past: Introduction,” (151-157) in Caruth, ed., Trauma
Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart: “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma” (158-182) in Caruth, ed., Trauma

Further reading: Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Chapters 1-4; especially 2 and 3).
Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy, especially Chapter 8, 266-297.

Feb. 1, Theorizing Trauma (II)
Saul Friedlander, “Trauma and Transference,” in Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993),
Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle” (61-75) in Caruth, ed., Trauma


Feb. 8, Testimony and Trauma (I): The Holocaust
Charlotte Delbo, Auschwitz and After (a trilogy). “Introduction,” by L. Langer (xi-xviii); None of Us Will Return (1-114); and Useless Knowledge (115-231); Optional: The Measure of Our Days (233-354)

Further reading: Michael Rothberg, Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Chapter 4 (141-177) especially pages 141-162.
Lawrence Langer, Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory

Feb. 15, Testimony and Trauma (II): The Holocaust
DUE: Paper 1, a discussion of trauma theory
Jean Améry, At the Mind’s Limit: 1977 and 1966 Prefaces (vii-xiv); “Torture” (21-40); “Resentments” (62-81); and “Afterword” (104-111) by Sydney Rosenfeld

Feb. 22, Trauma Fiction (I): The Holocaust
Cynthia Ozick, The Shawl

Mar. 1, Cinematic Representations of Trauma (I): A Community in Mourning
The Sweet Hereafter, directed by Atom Egoyan
Laura Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” (100-112) in Caruth, ed., Trauma
Kai Erickson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” (183-199) in Caruth, ed., Trauma

Mar. 8, Staging Trauma: Authoritarian Violence in Chile
Ariel Dorfman, Death and the Maiden (play); Roman Polanski, Death and the Maiden (film)
Sophia A. McClennen, “Torture and Truth in Ariel Dorfman’s La muerte y la doncella,”

Spring Break

Mar. 22, Trauma Fiction (II): Post-Apartheid Literature in South Africa
DUE: Paper 2, in which trauma theory is applied to a text or film on our syllabus
Sindiwe Magona, Mother to Mother

Mar. 29, Cinematic Representations of Trauma (II): Legacies of WW II
Hiroshima mon amour directed by Alain Resnais and written by Marguerite Duras
Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, chapter 2 (25-56)
Further reading: Cathy Caruth, “An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton” (128-147) in Caruth, ed., Trauma

Apr. 5, Secondary Trauma and Graphic Art: The Holocaust
Art Spiegelman, Maus I and II

Apr. 12, Metaphorical Trauma; Teaching Trauma
A selection of poems will be distributed by the instructor.
Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis,” (13-60; especially 26-44) in Caruth, ed., Trauma

Apr. 19, NO CLASS

Apr. 26, Student Presentations I
Talk for 20 minutes about your final project (Paper 3) and respond to feedback and questions from classmates and the instructor for 10-15 minutes.

May 3, Student Presentations II (see Apr. 26)

May 10
DUE: Paper 3, in which trauma theory is applied to a text or film NOT on our syllabus.