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## A PYSCHE OF TRAUMA, ITS GENESIS AND PERPETUATION IN MODERN- POSTMODERN SPACE

Devin Kaiming Zhang

Any attempt to locate the whereabouts of it ends up like a dive into the foggy heart of an industrial city. Trying to grasp it by gazing at it? Futile attempt as it is, it does reward you with a picture: a picture of you, of what's surrounding you, of what is not what you have in mind, that is the thing you are gazing at. It does not resist the effort of integration through comprehension, for how could one configure the being of an absence? Yet by its absence it gives you a distinct presence. The duplication of the surroundings is like a second degree simulation. You can navigate yourself simply by looking at the mirror image of yourself. No, I am not talking about postmodernism yet, I am talking about a commercial plaza/office building in my hometown. It's clad in a mirror whose sole purpose is to resist penetration, and to return the projectile gazes back to their owners. On one part of the building its reflective armor is shaped like waves, so as to achieve the cunning artistry of seduction—it shows itself by a disruption on its surface, to make you feel the presence of something on a completely flat surface, yet in such discovery of an artificial presence, the surface of absence that gave birth to it became obsolete to the one who beholds.

The resistance of penetration becomes contradictory when its porousness is revealed—the building has gates all around it. Entering it is waving-goodbye to the world outside, as I can still remember the moment I enter when it first opened and the unique smell in the mall unlike any other places I've

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ever been to—a biome of its own making—yet not so different from a hundred shopping plazas I’ve been to, as a stepping into a structure like this is the reincarnation into a mechanical, fully automated womb of glass dome. The escalator that goes from the first floor directly to the fifth floor never stopped, and I can still feel myself becoming dizzy when, being the only fool on that escalator, I turned around and looked at the four floors beneath me. I became dizzy, and myself on the first floor waved at me, and I waved back from the fifth floor, with no way of going down since the escalator only goes up. I was then pushed along by the crowd that patrols around the floor like sentinel bots whose sole purpose is to interact with products neatly arranged throughout the floor. I felt like a platter of sushi on a conveyor belt, where the products in my eyes became the consumer and I became a product. This is the topic of this paper, on malls, or to be more exact, on the postmodernity in which a shopping mall becomes an epitome of its character. I seek to identify some phenomenal similarities between the postmodern philosophical trend, postmodern space, and trauma theory. I acknowledge my proposed method of inquiry could make me a target of accusation, for how could I expect anything plausible coming from my analysis without announcing with confidence of my expertise and theoretical exertion, like an analyst to a patient, that these are your symptoms and here is your pill? Therefore let us reach a consensus before we proceed, that the goal of this paper is to send out an invitation, an invitation to think not hierarchically but horizontally, not foundationally but contextually, about the connection between trauma not as a disease inscribed in MDS-5 but as a discourse among common populace and what we now (often vulgarly and abusively) refer to as “postmodern.”

A dissection of the paper into three parts becomes helpful when making sense of the issue at hand: a brief account of the affinities between trauma as a theoretical discourse and the philosophical shift from traditional metaphysics-focused tradition to the turn-of-the-language inspired trend. Following is a short survey of the collapse of what is referred to by

François Lyotard as “metanarrative.” Then a study of postmodern space will join the conclusions of the two sections before, at which the purpose of it will be to highlight *how modern space is traumatic in itself, whereas postmodern space exhibits characteristics of post-traumatic experiences*. All three sections serve well for the final dive into a comparative study of two novels *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, where we shall see how connections between the postmodern and trauma manifest themselves. The stylistic choice of this paper will also be altered from the traditional academic style, for to talk about trauma one must not illustrate with mere arguments and quotations, but perform and emulate the structure of trauma itself. The rejection of the academic style and the adoption of the literary and the poetic is essentially the rejection of the metaphysical over the hermeneutics.

The subversion of modern metaphysics-centered philosophy is significant in the turn to language, in Saussure the signified and signifier became separate, allowing one to reminiscence the claim of nominalism—the pipe no longer substantiates what it refers to, that there is a gap between the sign, the symbolic, and the word “pipe” and the referent, the real, and the longish thing we use to smoke. It is a tradition that is post-Kantian in that the signifier and the signified resembles the relation between the noumena and the object-in-itself. This gap of meaning opens two possible routes to explore: the resistance of knowing and the collapse of a modernist narratorial order.

The results of the tendency in recent philosophical trend is especially notorious in the mutation of traditional philosophical work into the writing of theories, which is a process this paper participates to a certain extent. What incurs its notoriety and its reputation is precisely the coherence with the goal of “resistance to totality ... to teleology ... and to closure

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of any kind.”<sup>1</sup> In France the mutation into post-structuralism starts with seekers of escape from the all encompassing Hegelianism, or, if we are to be bold enough to imply, an escape from what appears fatherly, a resistance of the Oedipus complex. The infamous claim of Derrida “there is nothing outside of text” is almost trite due to its overuse. In a system of sign, “words depend on other words for their meaning, rather than on reference to some extra-linguistic reality.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, even the concept of transcendence is only sensible when it is configured not as referring to anything outside the system of the sign but an immanent transcendence. The criticism of postmodern deconstruction—that it rejects the existence of truth which leads it to be self-defeating—is a misread, whereas the denial of transcendence as such is not a rejection of it—not that there is no transcendence, but what the transcendence is as such. And this resistance dances vis-a-vis to the legacy of enlightenment, the desire to know and to edify, and plays as an orchestra of heterogeneity contra to the solo instrument of “the urge to know ... to convert otherness and difference into sameness,” a coherent narrative that excludes anything heterogeneous.<sup>3</sup>

Henceforth this movement resists the analyst, the bigger end of an extending branch, and the first hundred sturdy bricks you lay at the base when build a house, what comes is “the ‘arborescent’ model of thought,” the stroll of a schizo, a self-referential, contextual system that need no exteriority to sustain the narratorial sensibility. It resists to be made sense solely through the act of seeing and laying claims on reason, since “vini, vidi, vici”, according to this frame of interpretation, is preceded by “vini, vidi, intellexi.” The act of seeing accompanied by the act of understanding, of witnessing being translated through a system of predetermined sign (signs that

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Sheehan, “Postmodernism and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.21.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 22.

bear the marks of substantiation) into the qualification of mastering, and of a history grasped through a consciousness that interprets by a frame of narrative, as if history is like a grape that can only grow if it climbs the rack of meaning, is the order being subverted and criticized in the postmodern. Similarly, the history of trauma seems to carry the same dynamic as the tug-o-war of interpretation—the inexact origin of trauma and the attempt of locating it and to territorialize it through either psychoanalysis or modern psychological experiment resembles the dynamics between a system of sign as nothing but a constellation of sign and the attempt to give them arbitrary meanings, to make sense of what inherently no sense through a creative process of naming—this longish thing is what we call pipe, these symptoms you experienced results from the physical shock you received in your spine when train crashed.

The inability for trauma patients to provide a sensible account of where their symptoms originate from resembles a history out of touch with the possible methods of account. The basic philosophical inquiry “where am I from” finally becomes a strikingly demanding question when the event that causes trauma passes. The person who survived the train crash is left with a history that is not incorporated and a memory that is not entirely hers but nonetheless haunts her. In Cathy Caruth’s reading of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, there is a clear resistance to the attempt of making sense of by seeing. When the woman mentions seeing the event of Hiroshima in a museum, the man denies the aboutness of her experience, which “suggests that the act of seeing, in the very establishing of a bodily referent, erases, like an empty grammar, the reality of an event.”<sup>4</sup> The trauma erases itself when registered as history: “that happened to me a few decades ago/ I remember this city has been through from reading my history textbook.” What is known is solely the representation, whereas the origin of the simulated representation is no more, yet at the same time

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<sup>4</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), pp.29.

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exists as what cannot be grasped, something that haunts and cannot be articulated, since *every articulation disperses the essence of that trauma into the representational order of history*. This is why for Caruth, there is “the necessary betrayal of the particular past in the understanding of a history,” since it is not the trauma itself being commemorated, but it can only be commemorated as history through a system of sign that does not belong to one's own.<sup>5</sup>

To elucidate, a real historical example will serve the purpose well. On July 12, 2020, another earthquake happened in my hometown. The magnitude is 5.1, the circle of impact is about 10 kilometers. I try to collect information, including my mother's account, who was at the time at the site of the event. I cannot feel anything, much like the time when I toured the earthquake museum in my city that was dedicated to preserve the memory of the earthquake in 1967, with the magnitude of 7.8, and 244,000 casualties. I watched the documentaries, movies, and remains of that devastation. I comprehend, but I do not feel anything, except a ripple of empathy. Empathy for who? For the deceased? What is that which I witnessed? Is it the original trauma? A simulation of it? Or is it simply another story now I have to read? Was the museum tour any different from *Middlemarch*? Is it more real simply because there are collapsed pillars present? What if I donate some of my money for a *Middlemarch* museum? My experience of the museum tour resembles the experience of the woman in the film, which makes the contrast between an order of knowing and the lost origin stark. The moment of the earthquake is no more, and the moment of Hiroshima is no more. The genesis is only now preserved as a text that is open for seeing, but it is a representation of the genesis now that does not exist, a different type of real, a hyperreal of the genesis. The true moment of the trauma is not to be integrated into the consciousness, much like the earthquake sites preserved throughout the city, unable

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<sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 30-31.

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to be made sense of by the generation born after the earthquake, nor can they be torn down and forgotten. The authenticity of traumatic commemoration is an event that is forever lost due to the volatile essence of the event in relation to the attempt to articulate and to make sense of. However this authenticity is at the same time perpetually present because of its inability to be articulated and updated is forever present as something that cannot be articulated, catheterized, or compromised—an absence. This is why Caruth claims that “a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.”<sup>6</sup>

The resistance of seeing and knowing implies the need of interpretation. Hermeneutics comes after the death of God and resultant disruption of clarity of meaning. Perhaps the death of God is not exact here. It is better to say the death of God *as such*. To claim God is such and such can no longer be registered as a metaphysical claim of God’s definitive aboutness, but the essence of such claim recedes to a symbol, an exclamation—doesn’t mean it is empty, but its aboutness changes from a definitive claim about the ontology of what we refer to as God to a claim that expresses one’s faith, of one’s belief in the system of possible references one find possible to choose from. It is not that I am “reducing” the claim “God is dead” to a direct denial of the claim “God exists.” It is more like “the God that exists is not what denies other claims about the ontology of God once and for all, but to say that God is dead is, similarly, not to deny the claims about the ontology of God configured as existence.” God as absolute has died, and we now have to interpret and evaluate ourselves, just as the traceable origin of the site of trauma which repeats itself becomes invisible. To hand the interpretation back to the consciousness self is what it does, so there is no excuse like “it is true because it is outside of the system of interpretation and signs as the absolute, as the objective,” but “it is true within

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<sup>6</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 19.



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the system of signs, because of relevant inferences within the system that ultimately I have to interpret and decide.”

In short, it signals the collapse of “metanarratives,” where, according to Lyotard, legitimacy of modernity turns into knowledge that “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.”<sup>7</sup> Attempts of assigning any happenings to a narratorial order resembles the attempt of making sense of trauma through articulation, either through making a witness possible, or by submitting oneself to a psychoanalysis or psychiatrist. However, the state of traumatic experience where no witness is possible resembles this refusal to be categorized and archived by language of others. To have one’s defensive shield breached beyond one’s ability to integrate it, to make sense of it, and to make past a paving stone of the present, is to lose one’s history, severed from the present. The barrier that is “a barrier of sensation and knowledge that protects the organism by placing stimulation within an ordered experience of time” lost its power to order and to organize stimulations in traumatic experience.<sup>8</sup> The triumphing optimism of modernism that is constantly in a fight to “break with tradition and to begin a new way of living and thinking” turned into “a manner of forgetting or repressing the past . . . of repeating it, [not] overcoming it.”<sup>9</sup> The concrete “this is” and “thou shalt” turned into a process of recurring hermeneutics. Differentiating in styles of narrative from “working on time” in modernism to “working in time” of the postmodern, narratives became less of an event

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Postmodern Condition,” in *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Rya (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp. 510.

<sup>8</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Defining the Postmodern,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), pp. 1385-1388.

but more of a position.<sup>10</sup> Where modernist interpretation attempts to master the complexity of a narrative, postmodernism sees the complexity and the proliferation of text as “a promise or horizon to which art must try to live up.”<sup>11</sup>

Overall, the collapse of witness in traumatized individuals who can no longer be the witness of their own traumatic event means a repetition due to inability to integrate, provided the witnessing from outside is not sufficient or does not measure up to the authenticity. The loss of witness is contributed both by “the lack of responsiveness of bystanders ... [and] the very circumstance of being inside the event.”<sup>12</sup> In the meantime the postmodern condition in the collapse of traditional narratorial order implicates the need for references of an immanent order, a “self-knowing, self-referential system of discourse.”<sup>13</sup> The parallel here is one between the death of a witness and the death of the author, between an inability to articulate, an origin lost, and the erasure of the importance of the traditional authority that contains the meaning and the interpretative power of a text like a shop to their coupon.

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An origin forever lost calls for a recurring confrontation with something strange and familiar, at same time “at home” and “uncanny.” To be haunted by an image that is lost is to give up the epistemological, since knowing is not to be achieved here through laying claims on the real. It is a point of no return, but perhaps the gap between the point of initiation

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Connor, “Postmodernism and Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 63.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 68-9.

<sup>12</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.66.

<sup>13</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 82.

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and the post order can be made more comprehensible when it is epochal?

It is said the rapidly changing production method and the productive relation caused “all new-formed [methods and relations] become antiquated before they can ossify,” that is the case even if what a city feeds on is the ossification itself.<sup>14</sup> Fossils turn into coals, and people dig them up, burn them, geological accumulation turned into capital accumulation, and the enchanted earth now became the fertile soil for railroads and factories. The city where I am from is known for its central role in providing the nation with coal and steel before it is known for the earthquake. One of the first railroads in China was built here, and it became one of the first cities to modernize. The city commemorates its dirt and sweat well, as the workers in coal mines and on railroads will sweat no more now that they have been framed and put in museums, far away from the city center where the monuments of the earthquake and shopping malls lie. Sanitization now exists in museums that preserve mining equipment as well, but after all they were still ostracized. The German family that first came here and contributed a massive share to the development of the cement industry in the city now have their mansion turned into a museum, with bars and small restaurants surrounding it selling German craft beer. The good middle class consumers now can roam around the historical landmark while remaining a good and safe distance from the real cement business, while drinking a craft beer gazing at the representation of the heavy, the sweaty, and perhaps the dirty. What happened? Yet one thing is for certain, that no matter what happens, it is a constitutional, quintessential change in the structure of representational and spectacular order.

Modernity, if not anything else, captures the motion of accumulation perfectly. The surplus being used as investment for a new batch of productive capital, the growth of

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, New York: Norton, 1978), pp.476.

profit, the rapidity of transportation, the growth of skyscrapers, the rising smoke of London smog of Victorian era, the roaring 20s, the pop art, and the overwhelming amount of sensory input that exceeds one's capacity to process are all part of the modern scheme, the motifs that epitomizes the modernity, the order of an utopian vision, the positivity that comes with positivism. It is this same motion of accumulation that set the definitive character of lyric poetry in Walter Benjamin, the shock that would be the central productive and creative force of poetry, and it would "sterilize this incident for poetic experience" when "it were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory."<sup>15</sup> In a sense, the shock experienced by lyric poets is to be the libido of poetry creation only when it is not integrated into consciousness, only when it is represented as *mémoire involuntaire*. The question, then, is what kind of literature can be created through such a process?

The question is essentially a question of what shocked the poet and how the poet shocked. For the first question I would like to suggest these factors as exemplary samples of study: 1. Public transportation in cities; 2. The mass in the city, the moving crowd; 3. The factories, the industrial landscape that characterized modernity; 4. The mode of repetition, for example, standardization of production and reproduction of artworks.

The action of parrying shocks assaulting one from all directions is not a privileged activity reserved specially for lyric poets. The case is for any city. For transportations, I got hit by cars twice, fell on the pavement countless times, and ran into someone a dozen times when riding an electric bike in my hometown, an upgraded version of the good old modern invention that serves as a *flaneur's* mount. I rode with little caution, for I know nothing will prevent me from being hit by something today. Either a car will run into me because it crossed a red light at the wrong moment or I will run into a car

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970), pp.162.

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because I am trying to bypass an area of traffic jam. I have my headphones on all the time, not because I am trying to get myself in an accident, but because I can actually focus better with headphones on, for I will be less paranoid from all the honking coming from all around me.

The crowd goes well with public conveyance like bacon with eggs. It is characteristic of Benjamin's observation, which is that "[the] interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterized by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than on that of the ears."<sup>16</sup> You don't wish to be blind in a city, for you will run into people all the time, or perhaps fall into a manhole due to the poor urban planning. You do not listen attentively for the sound of the bus that has its wheels rubbing on the ground from a far distance, you look out for the bus that is coming for you with the impatient driver on his third shift. You cannot let your eyes off for one second if you are navigating in a jungle of concrete. You will need good eyes to make up for the ears obfuscated by the cars humming their engines around, by people talking, by music played in stores, etc. This awkward position does not end with being a pedestrian or a bike rider exposed outside. It is more marked for people who are enclosed in public transportations like trains and buses. Those make up a position where one has to "stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging a word."<sup>17</sup> In subways, buses, especially during commute hours, one feels like a sardine in a can, or like a person trapped under a collapsed architecture under an earthquake. One is not only jostled by the elbows and feet of other sardines, but the transportation itself is constantly jostling and shaking, moving at an incredibly high speed that doesn't allow one to fully absorb what is happening to her experience, and one can only operate on an instinctual note.

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 191.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

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Amongst the interwoven web of a massively complex transportation system filled with numerous heads, one is subjected to a continuing flow of loss. To see a car pass by with flashing speed, to see people getting on and off on a bus, to be with others in a hermetically sealed place like subway or train, only to bid them farewell the very next second, all contribute to a sense of constant loss that is different from the traditional “travel from this village to the other on a slow cart or carriage” experience. The coincidence with trauma here is one of constant bereavement, where the visage, the locus of establishing an ethical and personal relation, is always in a state of afterimage, because there is no capturing one’s image unless you dedicate yourself to a career of professional stalker. This bereavement is “a farewell forever which coincides in [Baudelaire’s] poem with the moment of enchantment.”<sup>18</sup> The “agitated veil” of crowd through which Baudelaire sees Paris is common to all city dwellers, which consists of imposed activities like being pushed around, or spotting a visage in a surging tide of crowd, only to have it lost and replaced by a new face new second. The experience in a modern city is therefore traumatic in the sense that one experiences a physical dizziness from transportation and a psychical dizziness, a recurring loss, when being placed in a crowd that is constantly moving without its own telos.

“He becomes an appendage of the machine.”<sup>19</sup> Is it a passage referring to Chaplin’s movie *Modern Times*? Chronologically speaking, no. Formally speaking? Yes. The proletarian condition told by Marx has become the collective experience of the modern era. Like works when the industrial revolution first ignited its engine, the subjugation to a machine rhyme became more and more prevalent. For young and old alike, “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 169.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, New York: Norton, 1978), pp.479.

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complex kind of training.”<sup>20</sup> The mortar shells and the motor engines are both the contraptions of industry that collared around us and gave us a new sensation of time. A machine time. We no longer move with *our* volition, the clash between traditional craftsman model of industry hence forms a sheer contrast with the mode of calculation in wage labour. Lyotard’s observation of technology is more than fitting: “[technologies] doesn’t respond to a demand coming from human needs. On the contrary, human entities (individual or social) seem always to be destabilized by the results of this development.”<sup>21</sup> The human subject, henceforth is rendered incapable of processing the stimuli, incapable of integrating the rapidly revolutionizing experience and capital models, and a permanent sense of loss attributes to this sense of unintergrability.

Repetition is a central pattern for both modernism and trauma. The assembly line renders the mass production possible through a series of adaptations to machine time, and technologies like photography and film allowed the affordable replication of artworks that were confined only to a specific group of people before. In short, what we witness in the process of reproduction of the artwork, according to Benjamin, is the loss of the aura, the immediacy and authenticity of the artwork. Moreover, just as in the traumatic repetition, where “the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing,” the reproductive order of the artwork takes on meaning on its own.<sup>22</sup> “The work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility,” just as the repeated traumatic experience becomes trauma in itself.<sup>23</sup> The modern invention and reorganization of productive relations

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 175.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Defining the Postmodern”, 1387.

<sup>22</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 65.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018) pp. 981.

provides repetition of traumatic experiences. Such is essentially the modern sensation experienced by Baudelaire: “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.”<sup>24</sup> Reproduction of films, one of the most prominent modern art form, marks the height of such transition from aura infused art into the order of pure reproduction where the first paragraph of Debord’s *Society of Spectacle* perfectly captures: “[everything] that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”<sup>25</sup> The shattered graphics in Debord’s *Mémoires* can be read as a shocked psyche traversing in the highly modernized cities. However, if we stop at the reading of Debord, we stop at the height of modernity. Its continuation, however, is in Baudrillard, and a movement from trauma eliciting modernity to trauma-sustaining or trapped in trauma postmodern landscape is made possible.

The reading of postmodern landscape will be accompanied by two texts, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, with structural similarity about the protagonist traversing through a cityscape in search of a sign that (arbitrarily) relates to one deceased.

What, then, are the two protagonists searching? Perhaps what is not the relevant question here, for it is, like all signs, heavily laden with an unarticulated proposition, that there is something that they are searching that is real. And by real here, again, I do not mean real as the opposition of false, but real as the “above” of a designated “false”. Therefore, the question of Oskar—“if you don’t tell me anything how can I ever be right”—is to be rephrased into “how could [he] ever be wrong.”<sup>26</sup> And Oedipa’s question “shall I project a world” is no longer a question as her “projection” became highly simulated that the readers are forced to participate in her alleged

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 194.

<sup>25</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, 2018), pp.1.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), pp.9.



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paranoia.<sup>27</sup> The reader has to linger from “is he/she mentally abnormal” to a full involvement of the narrative of a finally made-reasonable tale, which is perhaps the only possible structural equilibrium one could possibly locate and achieve—not in the text, but in the reader herself.

Since the inquiry about the “realness” of their experience was delegitimized, the two novels share the same textual performance in presenting a “‘flat’ network of areas of inquiry,” in which “the respective frontiers of which are in constant flux.”<sup>28</sup> Different from a plot of a classical bildungsroman novel, I would argue, no real “growth” has been presented in both novels in regard to the psyche of the protagonists. For Oedipa, she is physically active, moving through different spots and through different people in search of the truth of the post horn symbol she perceives to have significance, but all her actions are predetermined. She does not bring changes to anyone she had a conversation with, but her role is not passive in the traditional sense. As for Oskar, all his activeness are rewarded only with a fantasy, an untied knot—the letters he sent, the play in which he is involved with, and the final scene of digging up his father’s coffin. In short, their stories “appear to have a progressive aim, but in reality they have always ‘been achieved’.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it is in this sense that their actions are simulated, in the sense that all the narratives about their stories weave into a coherent narrative within the confinement of self-referential motion without ever going beyond that: “the will to change is simply all-pervasive. The question is whether that change has a common goal (a modern telos) or merely exists for change itself.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York, New York: Perennial, 1986), pp.64.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Postmodern Condition,” 510-11.

<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.113.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 112.

This change for changes sake in the two novels coincide with the fantasy of Oedipa and Oskar, not fantasy in a Freudian sense, where the fantasy for an object or a scenario unravels the unconscious desire, but fantasy as the basic constituent of one's selfhood. What the two novels did par excellence to other narratives that are about the other trauma narratives is that it achieves the goal of highlighting the repetition of trauma through a gesture that points to the broken-down of psychoanalytic authority. A disintegration of the organizing force, of the epistemological imposition from hierarchy of a set of cultural values is required to bring about the complete collapse of any outsidership. For Oedipa, singing this trope with a higher pitch, we witnessed her psyche going to the limit—"the act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost"—and topped with a return of a *memoire involuntaire* of her college years, which is a frequent intrusion that was never fully explained.<sup>31</sup> In her frenzy she bent down her proud self-legislating force, changing from her uncompromisable resoluteness against the want of her subjugation to the authority, the lack articulated by Dr. Hilarius at the beginning of the novel, to a clear expression of a desire: "she wanted it all to be fantasy ... She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest."<sup>32</sup> A defeated schizo, in search of a legislative force, went for a psychiatrist. This is where, normally in a bildungsroman novel, our heroine receives her transition towards the other end of equilibrium, where she becomes a socially responsible woman capable of making the right decision. However, what we witnessed instead is a breakdown of the psychiatrist himself: Dr. Hilarius has gone mad due to paranoia. And a curious turning point is when Dr. Hilarius confessed his past and his subscribing to Freudian theory has a remedial mo-

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<sup>31</sup> Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 105.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 107.

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tive—because Freud is a Jew. It is reasonable to give the hypothesis that Dr.Hilarius is experiencing something similar to survivors guilt, but what is more amusing is that here it is Oedipa who takes up the role of legislating and becomes the listener behind the leathered couch. She even advised Hilarius to “[face] up to your social responsibilities [and accept] the reality principle.”<sup>33</sup> Yet this is not a simple reversal of the role, not a simple reversal of the master-slave dialectics, but an attempt to break the limit appears when Oedipa confessed to Dr.Hilarius that she seeks the expertise of Dr.Hilarius as a Freudian to dispel her search, what has constituted her character and meaning so far, as a mere fantasy. The reply she got from Hilarius is to cherish her fantasies, for, he questioned “[what] else do any of you have” and proceeds to dismiss the psychoanalytic scheme that which constitutes his identity as a healer and Oedipa’s identity as a patient: “don’t let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you ... when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be.”<sup>34</sup> A former fascist, Dr.Hilarius probably precedes the first English translation of *Anti-Oedipus* by 11 years. He and Oedipa thus sees the articulation of psychoanalysis that “if desire is the lack of the real object, its very nature as a real entity depends upon an ‘essence of lack’ that produces the fantasized object” and denied its legitimacy.<sup>35</sup> For them, fantasy is not a representation of the lack of the real, but what one ought to cherish, as it forms a flat surface, a contextually coherent system on one’s own account without any referential force towards outside—self sufficient.

The same goes for Oskar, when he resists the scheme and questions the rule of the psychiatrist who tries to find proof to prove him a PTSD victim. But what’s more important

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Pynchons, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 113.

<sup>35</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2009), pp.25.

is the role of fantasy in the narrative of Oskar. It seems where the ego of Oskar really resides is in his so-called fantasies. First, his searching of the lock and the connection making and clue searching is essentially a search for meaning in a meaningless landscape. Second, the novel essentially ends with a fantasy where Oskar imagines his father will be safe. What is genius about it is that it invites the readers to participate in Oskar's fantasy, not as an authority that judges whether he is in fantasy or not, but as part of Oskar, or as Oskar. The reversed flipping image of the person falling off the twin tower ensures the endless repetition of it since by going backwards one needs to go forwards first—especially for equipment like cassettes. Oskar refuses to go through a mirror stage and identifies with what he sees. In his book that records things that happened to me images of keys, Steven Hawking, turtles, geometric shapes, etc are present. How did this happen to him? Perhaps it is only sensible to Oskar. Thirdly, the image in Oskar's book of Hamlet holding the skull of Yorick is intriguing because one may guess that Oskar is identifying with the skull, but who could say for sure? In his school play, Oskar plays the role of Yorick, the skull of a jester where Hamlet gazes and interacts with as a passive object. Oskar's part is no part at all, he's been erased from the play. His absence is simulated by the all black costume and his papier-mâché skull, in order to "give the illusion that you don't have a body."<sup>36</sup> In fact, the illusion given is not that Oskar doesn't have a body, but simply that there is no Oskar. The sweet coax of the teacher given, that Oskar may steal the show if he plays anyone else, is shattered in the fantasy. In Oskar's fantasy on stage, he becomes no longer the passive skull who is being gazed at and is being known by the active Hamlet and Horatio, but it takes on a force of itself. No longer being subjugated and legislated by the gaze of Hamlet, Oskar announces Hamlet's fate by diagnosing him with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, which is in fact the disease

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<sup>36</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, 142.

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that has been tormenting Steven Hawking, whom Oskar admired. If this scene was a simple reversal of the role of the subjugated dead skull and the living, active, neurotic, and Oedipal Hamlet, it would be less charming to read this scene over and over again. What we witness is not a simple reversal in Oskar's reverie, nor simply a fantasy about revenging the bully, but a making sense, an identification with his fantasy, with his flat surface, which means an identification with his repetition of trauma. When he smashed the skull which obscures him and denies his existence against the head of Jimmy, the skull became the head of everyone he knows, the dead became everyone, implying the recognition of the ubiquitous fear, of the feeling that "the hostage [which is the victim] is unnameable, anonymous, a kind of ghost who temporarily haunts the imagination."<sup>37</sup> Is Oskar invoking universal annihilation? Is he repeating his trauma? We cannot conclude. But what we can conclude is that by announcing "DAD doesn't make sense. MOM doesn't make sense. THE AUDIENCE doesn't make sense," and that the only thing that makes sense in the fantasy of Oskar is "[his] smashing JIMMY SNYDER's face," and that in this young boy's fantasy he made sense, for "THE AUDIENCE is applauding, all of them, because [he is] making so much sense."<sup>38</sup> Like Oedipa, the refusal to cope through the imposition of a narrative allows Oskar to not identify with fantasy, because calling something fantasy doesn't make sense when the object designated as the locus of fantasy is denied. And as the reality fades, Oedipa and Oskar are able to repeat their trauma endlessly without confronting an overriding narrative of "accepting reality." It is a world-shaping that makes one's world into a Klein bottle, where all the difference between outsidership and insidership vanishes, and one is left with an endless repetition of an immanent nature. Such is a trauma narrative without trauma.

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 46.

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