

## On Visitations

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### Abstract:

In his monograph, *Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma*, Amit Pinchevski develops the thesis that modern mass media can transmit and obliterate trauma and pleads for using 'trauma' as a moral category. His work interlinks memory, communication and technology studies and touches upon clinical and psychological contributions to notions of 'trauma.' Combining numerous views on the echoes of violence and technology, Pinchevski contributes in an inventive and inspirational way into those disciplines.

### Über Heimsuchungen

#### German Abstract:

In seiner Monographie *Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma* entwickelt Amit Pinchevski die These, dass moderne Massenmedien Trauma sowohl übertragen als auch tilgen können und plädiert dafür, 'Trauma' als moralische Kategorie zu verstehen. Die Publikation verbindet Gedächtnisstudien, medientheoretische Erkenntnisse und Technikgeschichte und streift klinische und psychologische Beiträge zum Begriff 'Trauma'. Damit verknüpft Pinchevski verschiedene Perspektiven auf Gewalt und Technik und leistet einen originellen und inspirierenden Beitrag zu diesen Disziplinen.

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Netflix's new fictional show "Archive 81" (Rebecca Sonnenshine, Netflix, 2022) centers on the medium of videotapes and makes clear that the uncanny not only manifests in stories and symbols, it also infects the medium's material, it manifests *in* technology such as videotapes — thus showing that technology and the uncanny are interwoven. The show's topic reminded me of what Amit Pinchevski tackles in an intellectual way in his book *Transmitted Wounds*. Combining memory, media and technology studies and touching upon psychological and clinical notions of 'trauma' with regard to the Shoah and war in broader terms, Pinchevski's leading question is not so much if but how trauma is induced by listening to descriptions of violence, watching atrocities or even engaging with echoes of violence on the radio and on screen. Throughout five chapters, he develops his main thesis that traumatization does not have to be a consequence of a direct experience but can be mediated and modified through mass communication, and that trauma can be essentially formed and obliterated by technology. Although the title of his study carries the term 'wounds' he rather works on the term 'trauma.'

Pinchevski assembles his book around different forms of modern and postmodern media: In the first, second and fourth chapter, he discusses various manifestations of Shoah-related trauma that are revealed in recorded and retrieved oral testimonies. The third chapter revolves around another experience that might induce trauma: Watching TV coverage of disasters or mass violence, or what soldiers experience when operating a drone and viewing it attack as well as the drone strikes' consequences. The final chapter describes attempts to heal trauma through media.

In his introduction, Pinchevski starts with making a point for combining knowledge about clinical trauma and memory with technology and mass media. He underlines the semantic relationship between psychological and technological terms when describing a trauma: We talk about ‘flashbacks,’ ‘snapshots,’ ‘images,’ ‘imprints’ that are ‘burnt in’ and ‘engraved.’ He spots a “direct and causal relation between the event and its impression” (p. 7). The first chapter is dedicated to radio-casted trauma, namely the transmission of the Eichmann trial in 1961 in Israel. Pinchevski regards the radio transmission and the listening to the Shoah survivors’ testimonies as a “collective séance” (p. 40) as live voices without perceivable bodies were talking about the absent mass murdered and could be heard in nearly every living room, interrupting daily routines.

In chapter two, Pinchevski discusses trauma and videotaped testimonies using the example of the Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies, with reference to one of the archive’s founders, literary studies scholar Lawrence Langer (*Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven 1991), Pinchevski points out that video testimony allows a narration that “unfolds before our eyes and ears” (p. 53). A question Pinchevski raises with reference to several authors is if there will be a “deep memory,” one that “tries to recall the Auschwitz self as it was then,” even if every survivor has disappeared (p. 54–55). According to him, “the audiovisual archive is the ultimate depository of deep memory” (p. 55). He concludes that the idea of the broken narrative frame is crucial for understanding the effect — and the agency — of the Fortunoff video testimonies. The broken, ruptured narrative and thus the manifestation of trauma was and is important when survivors tell their stories on tape and it might still be important when recipients feel trepidation watching and listening to those video testimonies. Pinchevski convincingly develops his concept of transmission (transmitting images as well as transmitting trauma). For him, transmission is violent, a rupture and *something* is being transmitted when narration is fractured (p. 58–61).

In chapter three, Pinchevski moves away from Shoah testimonies and discusses distant trauma: Clinical research indicates that one can “be traumatized by watching a catastrophic event on television” (p. 75; 78–80). To further follow Pinchevski’s thought, it would be interesting to investigate the role of big social media players’ (like Facebook) content

moderators in (not) transmitting trauma as their sole assignment is to assess and delete cruel content.

In chapter four, Pinchevski tackles the famous New Dimensions in Testimony (NDT) created at University of Southern California and the Shoah Foundation, colloquially called ‘the hologram.’ The hologram of a survivor can reply immediately to questions from the audience. While breaking the (narrative and screen) frame is key to transmitting trauma, NDT’s characteristic is absolute “framelessness,”(p. 102) as narrative splinters can be retrieved and rearranged easily. Thus, the database and the index have become preliminary to narration. The hologram’s answers are customized, it simply replies too well, without hesitation, irritation or interruption. The absent (content; words not being said, silences; pauses; things that cannot be put into words) has always been a part of testimonies (and has made it possible to transmit something beyond language and gestures, for example trauma). Consequently, trauma is, according to Pinchevski, obliterated in NDT. I agree with Steffi de Jong’s observation that in pointing this out, Pinchevski makes an important contribution to the discussion of the NDT which in German speaking countries often seems to be stalemated as the discussion is usually pessimistic and fails to name the conceptual difference between NDT and, for example, TV (cf. Steffi de Jong, Review of Pinchevski, Amit: *Transmitted Wounds. Media and the Mediation of Trauma*. Oxford 2019, in: H-Soz-Kult 25.03.2020).

In his final chapter, Pinchevski does not discuss the transmission of and receiving of a trauma but rather focuses on modifying and healing trauma with Virtual Reality technology by referring to experiments in which VR technology was used as a means for exposure therapy. He concludes that this is yet another, not necessarily constructive, aspect of fencing the trauma in: immersive media can trigger trauma as well as contribute to healing it.

‘Trauma’ is one of the concepts Pinchevski applies throughout the monograph. However, ‘trauma,’ a term describing a material brain injury as well as a psychological condition, is an expression that is likely to become meaningless if it is applied one-to-one to collectives and cultures. In my view, ‘trauma’ is related to an individual subject, not to a collective (how a society communicates about traumas is a different question). Are there not any other terms or metaphors that describe the disturbing, a visitation, the uncanny, the perturbation, the pain?

Concluding, Pinchevski makes the point I find decisive: He pleads for taking trauma into the “realm of moral concern” and not leaving it only to “clinical consideration” (p. 145). He raises the question, what if none is traumatized anymore when we watch or hear about atrocities (cf. p. 144–145)? He rightly points out that ‘trauma’ requires an appropriate translation into cultural studies and philosophy — or another term is needed when we analyze mental perturbances in societies.

All in all, the book is a very interesting read for educators, scholars of the above mentioned disciplines and also for journalists and filmmakers that are interested in media and cultural theory. Pinchevski’s work opens a new dimension (reference to the USC New Dimensions in Testimony not intended) for understanding the entanglement of culture, technology and the subject. He also contributes to the discussion of how to mediate and remember the Shoah and large-scale atrocities in general. Pinchevski introduces the reader to numerous theoretical concepts such as the ‘uncanny valley’ by Masahiro Mori (“The Uncanny Valley,” in *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* 19 (2), 2012, p. 98–100), ‘framelessness’ by Mark Andrejevic (“‘Framelessness’ or the Cultural Logic of Big Data,” in *Mobile and Ubiquitous Media: Critical and International Perspectives*. Eds. Michael Daubs and Vincent Manzerolle, New York 2018, p. 251–266), ‘prosthetic memory’ by Alison Landsberg (*Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York 2004), ‘deep memory’ by Charlotte Delbo (*Days and Memory*. Evanston 1991) and the ‘paradigm of irony’ by Lilie Chouliaraki (*The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-humanitarianism*. Oxford 2013). He also refers to Friedrich Kittler’s notion that modern mass communication technology being used in civil life is a byproduct of technology developed for warfare that actually drives technological progress and modern history (*Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Redwood City 1990 and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Redwood City 1999). Following Pinchevski’s arguments in assembling those numerous concepts is a great inspiration.