



The Holocaust trope: traumatic memory and melodrama in Isabel Coixet's *La vida secreta de las palabras* (*The Secret Life of Words*, 2005)

Hilaria Loyo

English and German Studies Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

ABSTRACT

Using the Holocaust as a transnational trope, and drawing on the theoretical debates on the representation on trauma within Film Studies, this essay will examine the ethical and political significance of traumatic memory in Isabel Coixet's *La vida secreta de las palabras* (*The Secret Life of Words*, 2005), a transnational film that deals with the traumatic suffering of a female victim and survivor of the Bosnian genocide. A textual analysis will mainly focus on the generic treatment of melodrama in the film and be related to some extra-textual discourses on the Balkan conflict, to show how the film exemplifies the tendency to tap into the broad imagery of the Holocaust in a productive, intercultural way.

KEYWORDS

Multidirectional memory; Holocaust trope; Isabel Coixet; traumatic memory; *The Secret Life of Words* (2005); Balkans conflict

Holocaust impact on memory and trauma studies

The Holocaust has been central to the related developments of Memory and Trauma Studies in the Humanities. Although the 'turn to memory' in the Humanities forms part of a much broader movement that started in the early 1960s, it was the profound impact of the Holocaust in the context of '[p]ostmodernism's problematizations of grand narratives, objectivity, universality and totality,' as Susannah Radstone has noted, that 'prompted a turn to memory's partial, local and subjective narratives.'¹ Memory research has mainly focused on the subjectivity of memory and memory as representation of lived experiences,² which places memory in the particular, the subjective and the local as a starting point to be linked to wider and more generalized domains of history, culture, and society.³ The impact of the Holocaust led theorists to bring to the fore the limits of history and literature to represent the atrociousness of that event.

A later interest in traumatic memory has been informed by cultural trauma theory developed by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub at Yale University.⁴ Starting in the 1980s, in the context of American Holocaust discourse,⁵ and prompted by necessity to come to terms with the meaning of the Holocaust, the trauma theory of the Yale School derives from psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and deconstruction as well as from clinical work with survivors of the Holocaust and other catastrophic experiences (Vietnam War, natural disasters, rape, child abuse among other violent occurrences). This theory

CONTACT Hilaria Loyo ✉ hloyo@unizar.es, hilarialoyo@gmail.com 📧 English and German Studies Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Zaragoza, Campus Plaza San Francisco, Zaragoza 50009, Spain

© 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

has further problematized the question of representation by suggesting that the relation between representation and actuality is not that of mediation, as post-structuralism and deconstruction argued, but it is conceived as 'one constituted by the absence of traces.'⁶ Caruth uses the notion of aporia, or unresolvable paradox, to explain trauma where 'the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness.'⁷ Only in a later registration can a psychic trauma be recognized by establishing temporal connections between both emotional proximity and temporal distance to events that were not experienced as they occurred.⁸ This view of trauma has posed a further challenge to the understanding of history, where 'the possibility of a history ... is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference).'⁹ As Caruth further argues, '[t]hrough the notion of trauma ... we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not.'¹⁰ Only through listening – the testimony – it is possible to attempt to gain access to a traumatic history, but the disruptive effect of this historical trace can never retrieve the truth of this event. Trauma puts forward the limits of understanding the violent past event; for Caruth, the pathological symptoms of traumatic experience point at a pathology 'of history itself.'¹¹

Memory Studies boomed in the 1990s and stressed a new awareness of memory's status as representation.¹² The cultural obsession with memory was also reflected in the cinema of the 1990s,¹³ and Film Studies scholars have duly contributed to this memory turn. More specifically, they have not only been interested in the cinematic representation of traumatic events, the so-called trauma cinema, but have also been particularly intrigued with the crisis of representation in cinema that trauma theory had put forward.¹⁴ In particular, the theoretical claim that the relation between representation and reality is constituted by 'the absence of traces,'¹⁵ led film critics like Thomas Elsaesser to assert that trauma theory constitutes more a theory of referentiality than a theory of recovered memory.¹⁶ Thus, film scholars have shared with other cultural critics the key ethical concern about the transmissibility of trauma – that is, about 'the representation and response to traumatic narratives and images.'¹⁷ E. Ann Kaplan suggests that referentiality to a traumatic past demands a particular way of looking at films and can only be recovered through a reconstruction of elements, such as repetitions, hallucinations and other disturbing phenomena, that are construed as belated symptoms of traumatic past experiences.¹⁸ This view puts the film critic almost in the authoritative position of the analyst, invested with the capacity to discern trauma's absent traces. As Radstone has quite rightly asked, '[f]or whom, when, where and in which circumstances are particular texts read or experienced as trauma texts?'¹⁹ Thus, since the traumatized subject is a subject 'constituted by forgetting' who can only recover some traces of the forgotten past in relation to a witness, the spectator is often placed in such position to give testimony,²⁰ a central term in this theory, of those traces of past traumas. But to construct disturbing elements as belated symptoms of a traumatic past the film critic most often has to, according to Kaplan, read against the grain.²¹

Cultural and film scholars have also been concerned with the ethical and political implications of trauma theorists' interpretation of Freud's seminal texts on trauma and the implicit notion of subjectivity derived from it. For these critics, trauma theory leaves

aside the central role of the unconscious in traumatic memories in Freud's work and places the traumatization effect on the nature of an external event rather than on the subject's psychical experience of it.²² Instead of de-centered subject, caught up in processes of desire, fear and symbolization, the subject of trauma theory is conceived as autonomous, sovereign but passive victim of a catastrophic experience. Film scholars, among others, have been particularly concerned about the ethics of victimhood that may derive from this theory's notion of subjectivity.

This theoretical trajectory has been inflected by a parallel academic shift in memory studies towards the study of the transnational and global circulation of memory across cultural boundaries, thus departing from the earlier interest in circumscribing shared memories within specific communities or nations.²³ The Holocaust itself has become a transnational trope, a metaphor that signifies ultimate evil in popular trauma culture, as well as a dominant form of emplotting diverse experiences of victimization beyond its European context.²⁴ The Holocaust has also served as the main historical frame of reference in theories of memory that has proven useful to the study of numerous other contexts of traumatic memory transfer. Iconic images and symbolism attached to the historical episode of the Holocaust as a uniquely terrible form of political violence have been appropriated to articulate memories of violence and suffering in other historical contexts. A representative theory of this research tendency can be found in Michael Rothberg's notion of 'multidirectional memory',²⁵ a notion developed in his study of the way in which the memory of the Holocaust has been borrowed, exchanged and adapted in various public spheres on a global scale to articulate the collective memories of other seemingly distinct histories of suffering, such as those of slavery and colonialism. Moving away from the notion of collective memory as 'competitive' memory, where collective memory is understood as a competitive struggle for recognition, Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory' seeks to illustrate a more productive, intercultural dynamic in which memory is 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing.'²⁶

The Holocaust trope: Bosnian genocide in *The Secret Life of Words*

Both the discussion on trauma theory and Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory' seem appropriate to inform the analysis of Isabel Coixet's *La vida secreta de las palabras* (*The Secret Life of Words*, 2005), a transnational film that deals with the suffering of a female victim and survivor of the Bosnian genocide, 10 years after the end of the Balkans war in 1995. Analogies with the Holocaust were constantly drawn in the media and other public debates during and after the Balkans conflict (1992–1995) to describe the magnitude of the atrocities committed during the conflict, but also in the later debates about post-war reconciliation after the Dayton Peace Agreement²⁷ – a reconciliation process still underway. The Balkans conflict coincided with a revitalized consciousness of the Holocaust in the United States during the 1990s, a cultural trend that has been labeled the 'Americanization of the Holocaust'²⁸ and that contributed not only to the universalizing of the Holocaust but most significantly to the current public debates on foreign policy. More specifically, comparisons and analogies with the Holocaust were used in the debates over the justification and morality of the US and NATO intervention in the Balkans. Eventually, the slaughter of thousands of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica carried out by Serbian units would make the United States and NATO intervene to stop the bloodshed. Referred

to as a ‘Nazi-style ethnic cleansing,’²⁹ the event at Srebrenica ignited the moral outrage that justified the international intervention in the conflict, while the credibility of the Western alliance was also at stake. This film exemplifies the tendency to tap into the broad imagery associated with the Holocaust and provides evidence of the productive, intercultural dynamic of Holocaust memories.

Isabel Coixet was not alone in using the film medium to remember the traumatic events of the Balkans war. The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed the release of various films that mainly focused on the war traumas the conflict inflicted, some of them made by Serbian and Bosnian documentarians and filmmakers,³⁰ but others realized by non-Bosnian, European directors,³¹ who seemed to share Coixet’s need to recall them a decade later, the moment when Bosnia was ‘prepping for EU membership.’³² The writing and filming of *The Secret Life of Words* were motivated by a documentary on torture, *Viaje al corazón de la tortura* (*Journey to the Heart of Torture*, 2003), that Coixet made a couple of years earlier and in which the torture inflicted in concentration camps during the Balkans war figures largely. Among the many atrocities committed during the Balkans conflict, the systematic rape of Muslim women as part of an ethnic cleansing program also elicited, despite their historical differences, comparisons with the sexual violence exercised on Jewish women in Nazi concentration camps. Mass rape as a war tactic serves to degrade and torture the enemy, but in the case of genocide, rape is usually followed by dismemberment and death. The rape of Jewish women in Nazi concentration camps led inexorably to death as racially impure children could not survive. In the Balkans conflict, however, mass rape was also used to impregnate Bosnian women and force maternity so that they would bear Serbian offsprings and destroy their national identity. The women and children who survived the violence of concentration camps were later stigmatized by their own communities.³³ Knowledge of this organized mass rape of Muslim women put war crimes against women on the international human rights agenda for the first time in history.³⁴ For example, sharing with Coixet’s film the central concern for Bosnian women suffering the aftereffects of traumatic experiences of rape and torture during the war, the internationally awarded film *Grbavica* (*Esmā’s Secret*, 2006),³⁵ directed by the Sarajevo film director Jasmila Zbanic, helped to attract international attention to the Bosnian government’s neglect of rape survivors. The film gained a publicity that opened up public debates on gendered war victimhood and which exposed hidden ethno-nationalist and political tensions among Bosnian women activists. One of the specific political effects of the film’s success was the legal extension of state benefits to some sexual violence survivors.³⁶

To examine the ethical and political significance of this act of remembrance in Coixet’s *The Secret Life of Words*, and its contribution to the current debate on victimhood and gender, the textual analysis of this film will mainly focus on the film’s aesthetics, and more specifically, on its generic treatment since, as Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton have claimed, film theory has also interrogated genre for ‘its potential to yield specific ethical responses.’³⁷ A generic analysis is also most appropriate for the reading of multidirectional memory patterns in this film, for genres are, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, not only ‘ways of seeing’ but also ‘organs of memory,’ ‘the record of numerous “transfers” from one social realm to another’ over time.³⁸ The layered record of these transfers in genres creates their own archives, which in turn contribute to the transversal archive of multidirectional memory – one that, in Rothberg’s terms, ‘cuts

across genres, national contexts, periods, and cultural traditions.³⁹ The analysis below will seek to highlight the social relevance of this melodrama that tells, through a rather linear narrative connecting almost inconsequential situations, the apparently simple story of Hannah Amiran (Sarah Polley), a Bosnian refugee living somewhere in the north of England or Ireland, who manages to work through her war trauma thanks to a love relationship with Josef (Tim Robbins), an English-speaking man severely burnt in an accident on a North Sea oilrig, and to the contact with a small community of male loners.

In her work on trauma, Kaplan has singled out melodrama as one of the four modes of representation taken by trauma narratives.⁴⁰ As an aesthetic form, melodrama uses a double language of both repression and revelation, the language of the return of the repressed, the language that is able to dramatize social conflicts that are presented as personal struggles,⁴¹ a mode whose representational strategies give shape to distinctive pain-inflicting social experiences⁴² and hence can be read as symptoms of traumatic events that a culture needs to ‘forget’ at some historically specific time.⁴³ Melodrama, thus, transmits the pain of a trauma that cannot be represented. As a global aesthetic expression used to dramatize historically specific social conflicts, what makes melodrama a particular ‘mode of the world,’ according to Agustín Zarzosa, is that it articulates the universal problem of suffering.⁴⁴ Zarzosa draws upon the work of leading theorists of melodrama (Brooks, Gledhill, Elsaesser, Williams) to rethink the relation of suffering and ethics in the configuration of experience articulated in melodrama’s dramatic scenarios. Melodrama both redeploys the visibility of suffering and offers some ethics that confer rational sense as a means to ameliorate or eliminate suffering⁴⁵ – usually by presenting a ‘comforting “cure”’ in its narrative endings.⁴⁶

Suffering is a recurrent thematic concern in Coixet’s work, but the use of melodrama in her films differs from the classical renderings of its generic conventions. She consciously employs some typical tropes and narrative devices of melodrama to subvert or defy generic expectations. This particular use of melodrama has constituted one of the distinctive features in the very personal microcosm of her films.⁴⁷ Coixet’s fixation with melodrama matches her interest in creating a cinema of some social ‘usefulness,’⁴⁸ to have an impact in the real world – a new form of ‘cine de compromiso’ (‘cinema of commitment’), according to Valeria Camporesi⁴⁹ – through affective storytelling, which most often involves the use of cinematic techniques associated with the so-called haptic or ‘embodied cinema.’ This particular inflection of melodrama serves to represent the unrepresentability of traumatic memories and the way multidirectional memory may help to achieve some kind of healing for the traumatized subject.

Embodying the viewer as witness

The opening of the film clearly positions the viewer as witness in an unusual way. The film opens with a voice-over narration accompanying a montage sequence of slow-motion images corresponding to an accident in an oilrig. It is the voice of a seven- or eight-year-old girl whose source is never disclosed, but the clues given later in her narration suggest that this is an imaginary figure only existing in Hannah’s troubled mind, a repeated hallucination and belated symptom of a traumatic experience. The enigmatic words of this omniscient narrator –

There is so little, deep down. Millions and millions of tons of water, rocks and gas. Affection. Blood. A hundred minutes. A thousand years. Ashes. Light. Now, this now. A while ago. I told you before, didn't I? There're very few things: silence and words

– match a series of slow fade-to-black scenes, slow-motion shots of men rushing and shouting along the oilrig platform, and one of them, Josef, being engulfed by the flames. The broken sentences of the narrator's words match the fragmentation of the accident scene that through the fades' interruptions hinders a clear understanding of the scene. This suggested suspension of meaning is underlined by the non-diegetic trumpet solo dominating the diegetic muffled sounds of the oilrig crew, which accentuates the melancholic tone of the child's words, setting the mood of the film rather than giving information of what is going on.

The image of the accident, 'the exemplary scene of trauma *par excellence*,⁵⁰ according to Caruth, establishing a complex relation between knowing and not knowing, is accompanied by the omniscient enigmatic narrator's words ('I told you, didn't I?') that directly compels the viewer to listen carefully. This plea for attention is reinforced by the temporal references 'Now, this now,' conflating the present time of the narration with that of the viewing experience that allows us to be first-hand witnesses, albeit through images manipulated by editing and the slow-motion technique, of a catastrophe on the oilrig.

These techniques not only indicate the self-reflexivity of the film as a construction (the breaking of the 'forth wall'), but they also position the viewer vis-à-vis the dramatic events in a special way. They establish the viewer's position as 'doubly situated,' to use Jennifer Baker's term.⁵¹ That is, the cinematic techniques deployed here situate us 'at once outside the film looking on and inside the space of the moving images,' inviting us to inhabit what she terms the 'film's body.'⁵² Through the slow images, Robbins's extreme close-ups and the fade-outs,⁵³ the representation of the catastrophe departs from Hollywood's typical spectacularization of accidents that accentuate the remarkably destructive power of the blaze through images that emphasize instead the distress of the men involved. The slow-motion images almost congeal the men's bodies and faces to capture and make us feel their anguish at the shocking and unexpected occurrence of the accident. This opening scene stresses not only the importance of eyes and ears, 'silence and words,' as the sensory organs involved in the viewing experience of the film, but also the images' capacity to create sensory and emotional impact, effects created by what Laura Marks has termed 'haptic images.'⁵⁴ She defines a 'haptic visuality' as that which 'functions like the sense of touch.' Although they are not easy to recognize, 'haptic images' are created through extreme close-ups, out-of-focus or grainy cinematography and camera movements that prompt the viewer's eye to 'caress' the surface of the visual field, to be, as she has written, 'more incline to graze than to gaze.'⁵⁵ The embodied viewing practices⁵⁶ encouraged through the voice-over and the creation of 'haptic images' complement, and often problematize, the optical visuality associated with knowledge and mastery of the world seen,⁵⁷ by inviting the viewer to share the sensory experiences created by the film's images, thus proposing to the spectator not only 'a new way of knowing the world' but also 'a new way of "being in the world."⁵⁸

Through both the use of the enigmatic voice of the narrator demanding an attentive listening and the haptic images creating a sensory and emotional impact, viewers are

offered a clear subject position as witnesses of a testimony that they may not understand but with which they would empathize. As some theories on witnessing have formulated within the field of Trauma Studies,⁵⁹ the listener is not only needed to testify to the victim's narrative, to bear witness to massive trauma, and hence to participate in the creation of knowledge about the event, but he is also needed to be responsive to the traumatic experience of victims through, what Dominick LaCapra has called, 'empathetic unsettlement,'⁶⁰ for this close connection between the traumatized person and the witness to become a healing mechanism. The enigmatic narrator's request to pay attention to 'silence and words,' matches Dori Laub's advice that the listener must '*listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech.'⁶¹ This involves a demanding task since, as Don Ihde has noted, '[i]t is to the invisible that listening may attend.'⁶² Listening also contributes to the empathic embodiment of the viewer as witness, for, as Ihde reminds us in his work on the phenomenology of sound, we hear with our whole bodies.⁶³ Attentive listening will be essential in the construction/reading of the traumatic experience of the protagonist in the film, but, in the absence of flashbacks, a more careful attention should also be paid to more subtle modes of behavior that may exhibit signs of traumatic experience.

If the film's opening invites the viewer to experience the people viewed, thus engendering what Marks has called 'an ethics of shared embodiment,'⁶⁴ the ghostly narrator introduces a narrative enigma over her identity that elicits the viewer's curiosity about her role in the protagonist's troubled mind. Considering, as trauma theory sustains, that in traumatic symptoms such as hallucinations, repeated traumatic dreams or flashbacks, the subject experiences an involuntary 'literal return of the event' of an unbearably painful past, the clues to the enigma of the narrator's identity will be found in the gradual disclosure of details in the victim's narrative, as well as in the very words of the ghostly narrator herself. Hallucinations synthesize an imaginative and perceptual co-presence, in which 'what is "imagined" is "seen."⁶⁵ The auditory imagination here does not assume the form of inner speech but one from the protagonist's memory. As will be made clearer in the analysis below, the infant child that Hannah hears and sees in her hallucinations corresponds to the ghostly imprecise but literal return to her mind of the little girl, and perhaps of many other children, killed by her own mother that she narrates at the end of the film. Taken as a ghost of that violently murdered child that Hannah recollects, the uncanny voice of this phantom figure transcends the bounds of the individual psyche for, as Avery Gordon has recently theorized, the ghost 'is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure,' whose investigation may lead 'to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.'⁶⁶ In her theory of haunting, ghosts are the living traces, the memories of the lost and the disappeared, but it is the haunting, or being haunted that is important. She claims that:

haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will [...] into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.⁶⁷

This infant ghost ('I told you before, didn't I?') haunting us and demanding our attention mediates between the social and the individual, thus capturing, in Gordon's words, 'the constellation of connections that charges any "time of the now" with the debts of the

past and the experience of the present.⁶⁸ The film connects the early years of the twenty-first century with the personal traumas related to the larger upheavals of the twentieth century (mainly the Balkan genocide and its aftermath) and impels us towards a revision of boundaries (self and other; personal and political; past and present), towards ‘a transformative recognition’ that would indicate a direction for the future. Along the same lines of thought, Gordon, following Derrida, insists on ‘our need to reckon with hauntings and to ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts *out of a concern for justice*.’⁶⁹ The presence of the ghost in this film, then, summons the retrieval of traumatic past experiences demanding its logical construction.

The examination of this ghostly figure will provide clues about which transformative recognition viewers are being impelled to adopt as a direction for the future. By using the figure of the child, the film also borrows an image that has taken a central position in multidirectional memory to transmit ‘the possible ethical and political significance of the child as a bearer of memory and postmemory in a moment of violent global transformation.’⁷⁰

Representing the traumatized subject

The opening sequence is followed by another montage sequence during the credits that introduces Hannah as a withdrawn and enigmatic immigrant working in a factory. Hypnotic music fades into the mechanical rhythm of the machines encompassing a series of repetitive movements that introduce Hannah as an aloof, robot-like being living on a mere survival diet. Sitting alone during the lunch break, an overhead shot shows Hannah’s unvarying diet of apples, rice, and chicken, which according to a poster behind her is deemed unhealthy. The musicalization of mechanical sounds is usually associated with avant-garde artists calling attention to the semiotic complexity of sound. Typically, for some of these artists, mechanical noises have come to epitomize modern warfare and militarism.⁷¹ Interestingly, Hannah’s deafness seems to protect her from the penetration of this sound, while she appears to be a perfectly integrated mechanical cog in the machinery of the factory where she works. The loss of humanity in this first scene is immediately reinforced when she is summoned to the main office. Her boss obliges her to take a month’s holiday, because in four years, she has never missed a day, occasioning her co-workers to complain about her almost inhuman capacity for work.

This initial presentation of Hannah as a near-death figure, a mere biological life, echoes Giorgio Agamben’s depiction of the figure of the *Muselmann* in his theory about Auschwitz.⁷² The cross-reference to this iconic Holocaust figure in the film helps to establish productive comparisons in the depiction of the protagonist as a traumatized subject, thus creating imaginative links between the histories of these two genocides, much in line with the notion of multidirectional memory elaborated by Rothberg. Presented as a limit character occupying the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, a potential *Muselmann*, Hannah’s manipulation of her hearing aid, which allows her to be deaf almost by choice, suggests some kind of agency that distances her from the limit figure described by Agamben, who is both undignified and incapable of self-preservation.

In his work on the Holocaust and the Nazi camps, Agamben claims that its legacy continues to haunt and conform contemporary modern life and has given rise to new modern

camps and states of exception. Further resonances with Agamben's depiction of the remains of Auschwitz in the film can be found in the following shots depicting the desolate landscape she crosses on her way home after work. Encompassed by the same hypnotic and robotic music, highlighting her perfunctory and monotonous life style, she walks by a scrapyard with what seem to be the remnants and only survivors, like Hannah, of some shipwreck. The ruins are meant to evoke some kind of loss, a loss of humanity. In a shot that is repeated at the end of the film, the white color of an abandoned ship in the debris seems to defy its complete destruction by the slow-destroying rust, connoting the character's inner state and capacity for survival (see Figure 1).

Hannah's solitary and robot-like existence finds typically melodramatic expression in the superficial elements of the *mise-en-scène*, in addition to sound, such as the use of lighting, setting, color, and props, but also of screen space and composition. When Hannah returns home from work for the first time, wide-angle shots emphasize the emptiness of her scantily furnished flat, conveying once again the sense of solitude. The voice-over narrator informs us, with the same conversational and direct style of address ('let me tell you'), that 'she has never seen my face, but I'm her only company' and explains that for some unknown reason, she sees the phantom child wearing the same clothes – a light blue jumper and red corduroys – and in different hairstyles. The phantom voice gives more details about the imagined mother-child relation between Hannah and the phantom child: she lies by her side, tells her stories – 'scary ones' –, and strikes her hair. The words reveal an imagined scenario that differs from the atrocious one recounted in her final confession: instead of the unbearable horror of a mother being forced to kill her own child, we are presented with a mother showing proper protection and affection toward the child.

In a sharp contrast with the dark and grim colors (browns and grays) of the industrial town where she lives, the combination of red and blue associated with the child clothes



Figure 1. Remnants and survivors of catastrophes defying complete erasure. Courtesy of El Deseo D.A., S.L.U.

recurs in the film to connote Hannah's traumatic memory, even before being commented on by the ghostly narrator. When Hannah walks to the main door of her home, a combination of these colors is already displayed in the red metal fence surrounding the terrace houses and a blue car parked on the right-hand side of the frame while a young woman pushes a pram down the pavement in the opposite direction – the woman pushing the pram seems to foreshadow the motherly relation recurring in Hannah's hallucination. The bright colors map onto the outside world both the emotional effects of her traumatic past, which the narrator associates with maternity and possibly the loss of a child, and her current perception of reality.⁷³ The elements of the *mise-en-scène* reinforce Hannah's construction as an isolated character whose routines (her obsession with being clean, frugal eating habits, and need to be busy with manual work) and the ghostly voice-over are presented as symptoms of some kind of mental pathology. Although these elements, however, will acquire significance in retrospect, after her confession of the indescribable horrors she endured during the war, at this narrative point they seem to act out⁷⁴ the character's melancholic possession by a repressed past, too painful to remember but one that the phantom narrator belatedly addresses. But acting out is a necessary stage to the working through process.⁷⁵

The possibility of moving beyond this psychological paralysis and isolation, however, is already suggested, not only by the suppression of 'scary stories' in her hallucinations, but also through the importance of the auditory sense for the character as a way to connect with others. Initially foregrounded through Hannah's hearing aid, this sense is further underscored in a phone call Hannah makes to Inge (Julie Christie), in which she just listens and keeps silent. The identity of the woman is not revealed at this moment, but it becomes clear that she is the person who sends the letters Hannah leaves unopened, and her only real human contact. Although Hannah's silence is a symptom of the traumatic subject's impossibility to provide a narration of a past overwhelming experience, listening to the woman becomes an important sign of her willingness to break out from her isolation, foreshadowing the key role of this sensory perception in the film and in the character's evolution.

Once in Whelan, somewhere on the Irish coast where Hannah decides to spend her vacation and where the smoke coming off the offshore oilrig can be seen, the cold gray daylight expresses the monotony of her solitary life. But the color temperature changes drastically when Hannah, overhearing a phone conversation, approaches a man in a restaurant and takes a nursing job. Josef, a member of the oilrig crew who suffers from burns and serious injuries, needs some immediate care before being transferred to a hospital. The red hues bathing the restaurant scene signal a significant turning point in the narrative and in Hannah's solitary life, a moment at which Hannah takes initiative for the first time.⁷⁶ Coincidence, an important element in melodrama, will lead Hannah to the oilrig, where she will be able to 'work through' the experience of war, a process necessary to avoid its repetition. At this point, the ghostly voice-over narrator explains that 'killing time' motivates Hannah's volunteering for the job. An off-centered close-up of Hannah looking off-screen at the sea suggests her reluctance to engage in her new occupation, while a close-up of Victor (Eddie Marsan) observing her highlights her strange, sad, detached expression. The infantile voice-over narrator will not be heard on the oilrig, where Hannah will intensify her penchant for listening, a perceptual activity having a key function in her work-through process there. Mediating between the spectator and Hannah's tormented mind,

this phantom figure has so far provided vague hints about her affectionate attachment to the child and clearer remarks about life being reduced to simple elements: affection, blood, ashes, time, water, silence, and words.

Working through trauma: bearing witness and the secret power of words

The oilrig where Hannah works through her trauma is, ironically, a space completely isolated from the outside world: repeated traveling shots around the oilrig and extreme long shots present it as an artificial island in the middle of nowhere. This secluded space serves, however, as a refuge for the few remaining crew, a group of outsiders from different parts of the world who, like Hannah, want ‘to be left alone.’ And it is through listening to the stories of these other loners that she will eventually find the words to articulate, however incompletely, her traumatic experience.

Listening as therapy is soon underway there. Lodged in Josef’s room, eye-line matches and camera movements mimic her inquisitive glances at Josef’s personal objects, among them a cell phone with a love message from the woman in a photograph, his lover and his best friend’s wife. The strong emotional impact caused by this love message is suggested by the many times she listens to it and is visually conveyed through the transformation of the screen space. The double framing created by an open door, and the position of her body evoke a womb-like space, at once protective and painful, that differs drastically from the screen space expressing her desolation in her apartment and that connects with the motherly affection of her hallucinations.

The most important part of her therapeutic process takes place in her encounters with Josef, the man who was burned and temporarily blinded when he tried unsuccessfully to rescue his best friend during the oilrig explosion. In their first encounter, Josef starts an intimidating seduction game with Hannah. Deprived of sight, he shows an irrepressible curiosity about her looks, the kind of men she likes, her national origin and name, to which Hannah, impervious to his inquisitive attack, keeps silent, responding only with matter-of-fact clinical comments. Although Josef’s blindness denies him any scopic pleasures, he fetishizes her in his imagination, ‘Are you a blonde? I bet you are a blonde, you have a blonde voice.’ Hannah’s silence can be interpreted as a resistance to being fetishized, indicated by her unkempt hair and loose clothes connoting a certain asexuality. In fact, after one of her laconic conversations with Josef, in which she confesses that she only eats chicken, rice, and apples, he immediately assumes that she is a nun, ‘the little sister of the chicken and rice,’ thus associating her eating habits with sexual chastity.

Finally, Hannah tells him that he can call her Cora, a name he has suggested, and that she is a redhead. Through the common trope of false identities in melodrama, Cora, Hannah’s new identity, will gradually come out of her numbness by showing a voracious appetite for food, a sign of her newly awakened sexual desire.⁷⁷ Leire Ituarte-Pérez has read this evolution of Hannah as replicating the conventional generic plot of a type of melodrama centered on doctor-patient relationship in which the despectacularization of the female body is read as a symptom of some pathology related to a problematic female sexuality. By transforming the medical gaze into an erotic gaze, the doctor will unveil and cure the woman’s sexual problem and pathology by eventually constructing the woman as a sexual object. Ituarte-Pérez is right to point out the conventions of this type of melodrama in relation to Coixet’s film,⁷⁸ but in this film the doctor-patient

relationship works in both ways. And soon the 'medical' attention moves away from Hannah's problematic sexuality towards Josef's. While taking care of Josef, Hannah discovers that his seductive pose hides a fragile man, fearful of death and needful of love, and an equally traumatized human being. Meanwhile, Josef's blindness and burned skin have intensified his sense of touch and smell as he not only notices her smell of 'sweet almond soap' but can also 'read' Hannah's reactions through the way she touches him. The camera registers the importance of touch through haptic images, close-ups of Josef's reactions to her 'sexy latex hands' and these senses will allow him to discover forms of 'an intersubjective eroticism' with Hannah/Cora, an erotic relationship created, according to Marks, by 'a shifting between distance and closeness' that departs from the distancing erotic gaze of optical visuality associated with mastery.⁷⁹

The exchange of secrets that follows reveals that Josef's wounds are deeper than they seem. In this newly gained intimacy, whose emotional impact is rendered visually through the recurrent use of framing that includes the two characters, he confesses that he cannot swim, and then relates the story of a traumatic childhood experience. He was terrified of sea monsters because of a TV series, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, and one summer his father, who could not swim either, took him in a paddleboat and threw him into the sea. The memory of this incomprehensible act of violence seems to be brought back by the accident in the oilrig, two situations in which he survived. Josef's trauma fits into LaCapra's category of 'structural trauma,' one that is individual and has to do with transhistorical absence, common to all societies. Absence is usually converted into a loss, giving rise to myths of origins, of omnipotence, or of the Oedipal complex and castration anxieties that Josef's story seems to reveal. In the next encounter, the viewer discovers how deeply affected he is by the loss of his best friend and the guilt he feels over his suicide. Josef's confession of his love for his friend's wife causes him such an unbearable pain that induces his suicide. Beyond the situation of victim or near perpetrator, the central question of this story pivots around survival. In pain and unaware of Hannah's secret, he asks her 'How do you live with the dead?' – a crucial question in the film that refers to the survivors of atrocities who carry the blame and shame for those unjustly dead; a question that relates justice and ethics concerning a past that disturbs the present urging it towards some orientation for action in the future. For Hannah, some manage to go on, meaning that they undergo a mourning process, but others do not, implying that they get paralyzed by melancholy.

The empathetic bonds created between speaker and listener in this testimonial act, constitute the necessary stage in their mutual healing process. Hannah becomes, using Rothberg's terminology, the 'implicated subject,'⁸⁰ which refers to those who connect in various modes of relation to traumatic events they did not directly experience. Josef's account of his traumatic childhood memory and the insight into his current unbearable sense of loss and guilt implicate Hannah as she feels the need to reveal her own secret. Hannah's listening therapy culminates with her account of the torment that she endured during the war, an account that offers some clues about the film's emphasis on the defetishization of the female body and its ethical position vis-à-vis the representation of the traumatic events. In the scene where her body and face appear almost in the dark, Hannah first establishes a clear separation between herself and her body as a common defensive mechanism in situations where bodies are exposed to a distancing gaze. While bathing Josef she tells how she used to hate

cleaning patients because she thought that they felt ‘uncomfortable,’ but she realizes now that they were thinking, ‘It’s only a body, you’ll never really know what I’m thinking or who I am.’ But then she soon became aware that the patients liked to entrust their bodies to her hands because the sensation of feeling clean was more important than the embarrassment caused by the exposure of their bodies. This explanation also depicts Josef’s evolution from his first defensive reaction to Hannah’s nursing contact with his body. Later on in her confession, her words make it clear that she experienced the same self/body separation when trying to block out the unbearable pain of the torture. She explains how she counted the screams to measure the pain with the hope that ‘her friend’ would die. Hannah has finally found the words to depict the dissociation of her *persona* through the mind/body separation and the transference of her own body onto an imagined friend – a common process defined as ‘a splitting of the content of consciousness’ that pushes the traumatic memory away.⁸¹ ‘When Hannah does bare her breasts onscreen,’ as Slobodian has noted, ‘she is not displaying the desirable object but rather a damaged shell that matches Josef’s.’⁸² Closer shots and slow camera movement show how Hannah guides Josef’s hand on her scars for him to feel the unimaginable pain of torture, in a reverse gesture of Hannah’s hands cleaning his wounds. Reverse shots of Josef’s face show the horror of the unconceivable suffering that only this haptic experience could transmit, and which the viewer also shares. After sharing their traumatic testimonies, they heal their souls through the union of their bodies in an embrace and kiss in a moment of intense intersubjective eroticism (see Figures 2 and 3).

Her account provides a poignant testimony of some unfair violence and cruelty that invites the viewer to establish further connections with Agamben’s biopolitics paradigm in relation to the Holocaust. Her story narrates a context that subjects both women and men to the condition of what Agamben has called ‘bare life,’ where bodies become disposable, a ‘life that may be killed but not sacrificed,’⁸³ a condition that converts them into both victims and perpetrators of inconceivable violence. She tells how she witnessed a woman being forced to kill her own daughter so that she could not become a grandmother and how a young man whispered in her ear ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry’ while raping her so that he could not be heard by the other male soldiers. For Agamben, the unprecedented horror of the Nazi concentration camps where human life, ‘stripped of every political status,’⁸⁴ degraded to bare life to be destroyed with impunity, has become the rule rather than the exception. The concentration camp is a metaphor, the ‘fundamental biopolitical paradigm’ of modernity⁸⁵ that totalitarian regimes and the continuous histories of genocide make devastatingly apparent but that remains hidden in Western democracies. In this sense, Hannah’s revelation sheds new light, in retrospect, not only onto her mysterious behavior but also onto the stories of other characters in the film thus exposing other forms of bare life in our modern democracies that are not easy to discern. Less obvious instances hinted at in the film are the workers in the oilrig or at the factory, biologically alive and economically exploited by big companies that deprived them of their rights, as in the flagrant case of illegal immigrants or war refugees in what Agamben calls ‘dislocating localizations,’⁸⁶ modern concentration camps, locations in the permanent state of exception.



Figure 2. The sense of touch as a form of communication. Courtesy of El Deseo D.A, S.L.U.

How do you live with the dead? Making sense of pain and ethics

Once the enigma of Hannah's pathology is resolved, Hannah and Josef's story would predictably end with their separation back on shore, with Josef being transferred to a hospital to be operated on to recover his sight and Hannah returning to her previous life. While this predictable ending does not offer a closure, it does provide the logos of pathos, a sense of suffering, pointing to an impossible ethos, an ideal.⁸⁷ Bare life does not seem to leave much hope for resistance, as Hannah makes clear when she expresses her



Figure 3. Shared pain finally fuses Hannah's and Josef's bodies into an embrace and kiss. Courtesy of El Deseo D.A., S.L.U.

admiration for Martin ('I really envy you Martin, I didn't know that people like you were still around'), the oceanographer, and one of the loners in the oilrig, who stubbornly believes that something could be done to cleanse the water the oilrig spoils – water becomes a clear symbol of life in the film, on whose purity the preservation of our future and life depends. Against the paralyzing vulnerabilities of the globalized biopolitical order, the wounded and displaced can only find forms of resistance, the film postulates at this point, within the sphere of the private (indulging in chocolate bars, or illicit sex) and take solace in some transitory moments of life-sharing (words, silences, touches) where they can regain some sense of being fully alive.

The film, however, offers a second ending that takes us to Copenhagen, Denmark, to the International Rehabilitation and Research Center for Torture Victims (IRCT), where the clues to the film's social dimension are clearly given. Inge, the real name of Inge Kemp Gnefke, the founder of the IRCT and to whom Coixet also dedicates the film and documentary,⁸⁸ shows Josef, and us, an archive holding the recorded testimonies of numerous victims of torture that extends Hannah's trauma beyond the individual, asserting it as a case of historical trauma. LaCapra defines historical trauma as specific and requires empathy and empathetic unsettlement – an experience that allows one to take the position of the other while acknowledging the difference and resisting full identification with the other – to work through its legacies and orient us in the elaboration of more desirable social and political models.⁸⁹ Interestingly, no graphic portrayals of violence underscore Hannah's poignant description of the war horrors, or are given to satisfy Josef's curiosity, thus forestalling either a voyeuristic position for viewers, commonly offered in television news, or their vicarious traumatization. The historical connection is, however, made in the earlier visual display of Hannah's scars on the screen that already transformed her subjective experience into a collective one. For Judith Herman, there is a need to create 'a social context that affirms and protects the victim.'⁹⁰ Her scars become the public trace of a traceless experience, the 'switch point' between the troubled mind of the subject and the collective identity of a group.⁹¹ The question to be asked is which group? Her account refers to the Bosnian war and, more specifically, to a hotel used as a rape camp where she and her friend, together with other women, were held and tortured often to death. Hannah's scars then become the badges of a cruel violence with which the film honors those women who survived the horrors of the Bosnian war and had the courage to show their war wounds, overcoming the shame of having survived ('a shame greater than the pain') but also reversing the shame and stigma to which their Bosnian communities condemned them.⁹² Repeated rape resulted in pregnancies and although many of the children born in the rape camps died, those who lived were stigmatized by their mother's honor-based community and often by the mothers themselves, as they became the living proof of their mothers' shame and traumatic experience.⁹³

But the film, unlike *Esma's Secret*, sets the story outside Bosnia and the territories of former Yugoslavia while overtly disregarding the ethnic specificities of the Balkans conflict, which compels the spectator to understand the resonances of the Holocaust in this war as a global issue. The fact that Hannah is a blonde, played by Canadian actress Sarah Polley, can be construed as a gesture against the common orientalizing of Bosnian women in the media,⁹⁴ firmly locating the Bosnian conflict within modern Europe (of Fiat Turbo, educated women, novels and frivolous songs like 'La dolce vita'). The only ethnic reference is made when Hannah explains that the crimes were committed

by soldiers who spoke her language, apparently unwilling perpetrators, too scared to disobey their superiors, in the ineffectual presence of UN troops who spoke English, Josef's language. This language difference only adds to Hannah's awareness of being an exile in an undetermined English-speaking country, subjected, like the other immigrants surrounding her in the factory or on the oilrig, to racial/ethnic prejudice. Hannah's comment, 'you always think that wars happen somewhere else,' brings in the common belief that wars occur in remote, uncivilized areas rather than in modern Europe, one of many long-standing assumptions challenged in the wake of ruthless globalization. This new awareness seems to echo Rothberg's idea of multidirectional memory and position against competition for victimhood. Inge makes explicit the film's emphasis on the Bosnian genocide as part of global modernity by reminding us of some twentieth-century European genocides – the Armenian, the Holocaust, and the Balkans – and the horrifying ease with which our modern cultures deny them and, therefore, repeat them. Through this explicit connection, the film alerts us that their high recurrence hints at something inherent to modernity itself. In so doing, the film also universalizes the special vulnerability of women in modern biopolitics, particularly in those patriarchal systems where women's bodies are taken as property symbolizing male honor, which the violence exerted against women during the Bosnian conflict blatantly exposed.⁹⁵ In this epilogue, Josef's awareness of this violence in the transformation of the female body into a commodity to be exchanged between men as a control mechanism is shown in his refusal to master Hannah's body and story, a move appearing as the foundation of their love – the lifeboat offering a dignified survival.

In the face of this daunting prospect Coixet offers some hope by bringing Josef and Hannah together (Figure 4), a traditional happy ending that here seems to postulate the idea that acknowledging the pain of others is the basic premise for any political action, and where Hannah can develop from being a mere survivor to living some form of 'good life,'⁹⁶ using Agamben's term, a domestic space segregated from political existence. After Josef and Hannah seal their decision to continue their lives together with a kiss, Hannah is shown in a well-equipped and comfortable kitchen pouring a glass of clear water from the tap while the ghostly narrator, addressing the spectator one final time, informs that she has two children ('my brothers'), who can be heard shouting and playing from the house next door. The voice-over identifying the two children as her siblings reinforce the idea of Hannah's possible loss of child in the rape camp. Coixet's rendition of a good life for a war refugee consists in having a home, a place to belong, in some undetermined location with access to reasonable economic wealth and community harmony, as the scene suggests. An eye-line match of Hannah shows the blurred figures of the two children through the windowpane while approaching the house. Viewers can hear their voices, but cannot see their faces; only some red-and-blue-colored blotches of their clothes present them as two spectral figures that seem to incarnate Hannah's imaginary phantom child and narrator associated with her traumatic past, thus fusing the child figures of the past with those of some indeterminate future. The words of the phantom child ('perhaps I'll never come back') also reveal the incomplete healing of the working through process, as LaCapra has noted, 'working through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out and that, even in the best of circumstances, is never achieved once and for all.'⁹⁷ Children are presented as both the true victims in the film, unjustly dead and demanding



Figure 4. Remnants of catastrophes struggling for survival through love. Courtesy of El Deseo D.A., S.L.U.

justice through recognition, and bearers of memory and postmemory. By placing the children as epitomes of victimhood and innocence entitled to some compensation, the film presents them as representing sacred life in need of aid and protection, thus appealing to our humanitarianism and support of international organizations like the IRTC with no suggestion of political move.

Conclusion

The Holocaust trope in this film allows viewers to reconstruct the traumatic experience of a female survivor of the Bosnian genocide while compelling us to adopt a specific ethical response. Through a mystery plot and the presence of a ghostly voice-over narrator, this melodrama encourages the viewer's active participation to assemble the various formal elements suggesting traumatic suffering into a logical construction of a traumatic past that is validated by the protagonist's final confession at the end of the film. But, from the perspective given by Agamben's notion of 'bare life' and the concentration camp as a metaphor of late modernity's biopolitics, Hannah's final account of her traumatic experience expands the Holocaust resonances beyond the Balkans conflict to unveil forms of totalitarianism in the twenty-first-century Western democracies, where women fare particularly exposed. The references to the Holocaust and its connection with the Balkans and Armenian genocides in the film's coda explicitly alert us to their unacknowledged co-existence and explains the need to rescue from easy oblivion not only the war victims' pain but also the conditions that convert human beings into both victims and perpetrators of unimaginable violence, in order to prevent future repetitions. To this end the film, like the graphic documents held in the IRTC archives, wants to bear witness by becoming another testimony at a historical moment when recognition and reparations were still claimed. If the analogies to the Holocaust were vital to justify the international

intervention in the Balkans war, the Holocaust trope and imagery in this film serve to vindicate, ten years later, another international intervention, that of humanitarian organisations like the IRCT.

The spectator's endorsement to international humanitarianism is encouraged by the emotional impact aesthetically elicited by a haptic visuality that establishes a shared embodiment of sensory experiences between the viewer and the suffering characters on screen. The affective knowledge gained through this embodied spectatorial position, replicating the protagonists' emotional relationship, is reinforced by the presence of the ghost haunting us. Listening to each other incites an empathic unsettlement in the two protagonists, and the viewer, while initiates a process of recovery of the tormented minds. Although Coixet takes pains to present Hannah as a survivor rather than a victim by offering her a form of good life through a romantic happy ending symbolizing the inclusion of Bosnia in the modern world, the film still endorses victimization as the means to claim international support by presenting children as the truly innocent victims of genocides. The transformative recognition elicited in the film, however, points towards a future form of happy life in a domestic world segregated from the public realm of politics.

Notes

1. Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 21.
2. Radstone, "Screening Trauma," 84.
3. Radstone, *Memory and Methodology*, 12.
4. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*; Caruth, *Trauma*. Herman Rapaport identifies another group working in the field of trauma studies composed of applied scientists, psychiatrists, and social workers, who approach trauma using a behavioral model of psychology and with healing objectives in mind. Rapaport, "Trauma Archive," 68–81.
5. For the incorporation of the Holocaust as a constituent of American memory and the emergence of a popular trauma culture crossing US national boundaries, see Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, here 7–20.
6. Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 12.
7. Caruth, *Trauma*, 6.
8. Caruth, *Trauma*, 8; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4–5.
9. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.
10. Italics in the original. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. Caruth, *Trauma*, 5.
12. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*.
13. Grainge, *Memory and Popular Film*.
14. An instance of Film Studies scholars' interest in trauma studies can be seen in the two dossiers published by the British film journal *Screen* on the relevance of trauma to Screen Studies in the section of "Reports and Debates," 188–216.
15. Elsaesser, "Postmodernism as Mourning Work," 194.
16. *Ibid.*, 201.
17. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 3.
18. Kaplan and Wang, *Trauma and Cinema*, 9.
19. Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 24.
20. Testimony refers, in Radstone's words, to 'a relation of witnessing between the subject of trauma and a listener.' *Ibid.*, 20.
21. Kaplan and Wang, *Trauma and Cinema*, 9.

22. Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 13–9. See also Leys, *Trauma*.
23. Craps and Rothberg, "Introduction," 517, 518.
24. Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*.
25. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*. Rothberg's elaboration of this notion is based on the previous work by Aimé Césaire, Paul Gilroy, and many other authors. Other theories sharing this general transnational and ethical dimension of memory transfer are postulated, for instance, in Marianne Hirsch's notion of 'postmemory' in "Family Frames," and Alison Landsberg's 'prosthetic memory' in *Prosthetic Memory*.
26. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.
27. Catic, "A Tale of Two Reconciliations," 213–42.
28. Some key works on these cultural phenomena include Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*; Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust*; Shandler, *While America Watches*.
29. Steinweis, "The Auschwitz Analogy," 281.
30. Bosnian films like Pjer Zalica's *Fuse/Gori vatra* (2003) and *Days and Hours/Ko amidze Idriza* (2004). See Iordanova, "Whose Is This Memory?" for an interesting account of the various films and documentaries about the Balkans, too numerous to be included here.
31. Apart from Coixet's film, Christian Wagner's *Warchild* (2006), Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering* (2006), Andrea Staka's *Das Fräulein* (2006) also addressed the wounds of the Bosnia war crimes. *Ibid.*, 26.
32. Brownell, "Bosnia Reborn."
33. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence," 564–5.
34. After intense lobbying by human rights and feminist activists, rape was recognized as a war crime by the Hague International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1996. Hesford, "Documenting Violations," 110.
35. The film won three prizes, including the Golden Bear, at the 2006 Berlin International Film Festival. Brooke, "Esma's Secret," 53. Angelina Jolie would later contribute to the current debates on female rape victims with her controversial film *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011). A more recent film, *Dobra Zena/A Good Wife* (2016, Mirjana Karanovic), deals with the ethical response at the discovery of war crimes during the conflict.
36. Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood*, 4.
37. Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*, 13.
38. Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 280, 293.
39. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 18.
40. Kaplan, "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma," 204; Kaplan and Wang, eds., *Trauma and Cinema*, 9–10.
41. Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," 34–5.
42. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 11–20; Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 50–1.
43. Kaplan and Wang, eds., *Trauma and Cinema*, 9.
44. Zarzosa, "Melodrama and the Modes of the World."
45. Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television*.
46. Kaplan and Wang, eds., *Trauma and Cinema*, 9.
47. Rothwell, "Modernising Melodrama"; Vidal, "Love, Loneliness and Laudromats."
48. Coixet, *La vida es un guión*.
49. Camporesi, "Ante el dolor de los demás."
50. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.
51. Baker, *The Tactile Eye*, 84.
52. Martín-Márquez, "Isabel Coixet's Engagement with Feminist Film Theory," 556.
53. The use of fades-to-black in this opening scene evokes the first images of Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995).
54. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.
55. *Ibid.*, quoted in Martín-Márquez, "Isabel Coixet's Engagement with Feminist Film Theory," 555.
56. *Ibid.*, 556.
57. Marks, *Touch*, xii.
58. Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory*, 12.

59. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.
60. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 41.
61. Italics in the original. Laub, "Bearing Witness," 58.
62. Italics in the original. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 14.
63. *Ibid.*, 44–5.
64. Marks, *Touch*, 8.
65. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 126.
66. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.
67. *Ibid.*, 8.
68. *Ibid.*, 142.
69. Italics in the original. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 60; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.
70. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 27.
71. Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 45–67.
72. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*.
73. Slobodian, "Analyzing the Woman Auteur," 168.
74. LaCapra defines melancholia as a form of act out and mourning as a form of working through. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 65–71.
75. *Ibid.*, 71.
76. Slobodian, "Analyzing the Woman Auteur," 168.
77. Hannah's apparent contradictory behavior, namely her desire to connect while obstructing her efforts to make connections, shows the central relational paradox of torture victims. The film has been seen as an example of the healing power of relationships based on trust and authenticity. Cook, "The Movie *The Secret Life of Words*."
78. Leire Ituarte-Pérez draws upon Mary Ann Doane's work on a subgenre of 'women's films' centered on a pathological female protagonist in *The Desire to Desire*. Ituarte-Pérez, "Melodrama y 'Cine de Mujeres' español contemporáneo."
79. Marks, *Touch*, 13.
80. Rothberg, "Preface," xv.
81. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past," 165.
82. Slobodian, "Analyzing the Woman Auteur," 172.
83. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 114.
84. *Ibid.*, 171.
85. *Ibid.*, 181.
86. *Ibid.*, 175.
87. Doane, "Pathos and Pathology," 14.
88. Coixet devotes her documentary *Journey to the Heart of Torture* to the work done by the IRCT to help torture victims from all over the world.
89. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 78–9, 85.
90. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 9.
91. Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 264.
92. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence."
93. Salzmann, "Rape Camps as a Means of Ethnic Cleansing."
94. Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood*, 37.
95. Boose, "Crossing the River Dina," 94.
96. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.
97. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 148–9.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviews for their insightful comments and suggestions. My gratitude also goes to El Deseo, D.A., S.L.U. for their permission to publish the images from the film and to Timothy Bozman, Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, Eva Parrondo-Coppel, Anna Rosenberg and Chiara Tebaldi for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Research toward the writing of this article has been funded by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness), FFI2013-40769-P.

Notes on contributor

Hilaria Loyo is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Zaragoza where she teaches Film and American Studies. She has published articles on Hollywood film stars, the cultural reception of Marlene Dietrich, and the Carmen myth. She has contributed to book chapters on Hollywood female blondes and film genres in volumes like Wendy Everett (ed.) *Questions of Colour in Cinema: From Painbrush to Pixel* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2007), and Antonio Balasopoulos et al. (eds.), *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008). Her latest research project has focused on transnational exchanges, transnational cinema, cosmopolitanism, trauma, and melodrama in the films of Isabel Coixet.

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999.
- Baker, Jennifer M. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Boose, Lynda E. "Crossing the River Drina: Bosnian Rape Camps, Turkish Impalement, and Serb Cultural Memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (2002): 71–96.
- Brooke, Michael. "Esma's Secret." *Sight and Sound* 17, no. 2 (Feb 2007): 53.
- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Brownell, Ginanne. "Bosnia Reborn: Europe's One Time Wasteland, Devastated by War, Ideology and Ethnic Hatred, Is Staging One Helluva Comeback." *Newsweek*, August 7, 2006. Accessed December 12, 2012. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/>.
- Camporesi, Valeria. "Ante el dolor de los demás. La vida secreta de las palabras (I. coixet, 2003) y las nuevas formas del cine de compromiso." In *Arte, poder y sociedad en la España de los siglos XV a XX*, edited by M. Cabañas Bravo, A. López-Yarto Elizalde, and W. Rincón García, 91–100. Madrid: CSIC, 2008.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Catic, Maja. "A Tale of Two Reconciliations: Germans and Jews after World War II and Bosnia after Dayton." *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, no. 2 (2008): 213–242.
- Coixet, Isabel. *La vida es un guión*. Barcelona: El Aleph, 2004.
- Cook, Katrina. "The Movie *the Secret Life of Words*: Implications for Counselors." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 3, no. 2 (2008): 330–337.
- Craps, Stef, and Michael Rothberg. "Introduction: Transcultural Negotiations of Holocaust Memory." *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (2011): 517–521.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Working of Mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes." *Camera Obscura* 19, no. 3 (2004): 1–20.
- Downing, Lisa, and Libby Sexton. *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is. Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 43–69. London: BFI, 1987.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Postmodernism as Mourning Work." *Screen* 42, no. 2 (2001): 193–201.
- Elsaesser, Thomas, and Malte Hagener. *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Flanzbaum, Hilene, ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Gledhill, Christine. "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is. Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 3–39. London: BFI, 1987.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Grainge, Paul. *Memory and Popular Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Helms, Elissa. *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Hesford, Wendy S. "Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering." *Biography* 27, no. 1 (2004): 104–144.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Huysen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Making Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Ihde, Don. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. 2nd ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Iordanova, Dina. "Whose Is This Memory? Hushed Narratives and Discerning Remembrance in Balkan Cinema." *Cineaste* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 22–27.
- Ituarte-Pérez, Leire. "Melodrama y 'Cine de mujeres' español contemporáneo: el caso de *La vida secreta de las palabras*." *Zer* 17, no. 32 (2012): 141–156.
- Kahn, Douglas. *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*. London: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma." *Screen* 42, no. 2 (2001): 201–205.
- Kaplan, E. Ann, and Ban Wang, eds. *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening." In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, edited by Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, 57–74. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Marks, Laura. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Marks, Laura. *Touch: Film and Multisensory Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002.

- Martín-Márquez, S. "Isabel Coixet's Engagement with Feminist Film Theory: From G (the Gaze) and H (the Haptic)." In *A Companion to Spanish Cinema*, edited by Jo Labanyi and Tatjana Pavlovic, 545–562. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013.
- Morson, Gary, and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Radstone, Susannah, ed. *Memory and Methodology*. Oxford: Berg, 2000.
- Radstone, Susannah. "Screening Trauma: Forrest Gump, Film and Memory." In *Memory and Methodology*, edited by Susannah Radstone, 79–107. Oxford: Berg, 2000.
- Radstone, Susannah. "Reports and Debates: Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies." *Screen* 42, no. 2 (2001): 188–216.
- Radstone, Susannah. "Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, and Ethics." *Paragraph* 30, no. 1 (2007): 9–29.
- Rapaport, Herman. "Trauma Archive." *Diacritics* 28, no. 4 (1998): 68–81.
- Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Rothberg, Michael. "Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda – Trauma Studies for the Implicated Subject." In *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone, xi–xviii. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Rothe, Anne. *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*. New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Rothwell, Jennie. "Modernising Melodrama: From Douglas Sirk to Isabel Coixet." *Journal of Catalan Studies* (2011): 272–291.
- Salzmann, Todd A. "Rape Camps as a Means of Ethnic Cleansing: Religious, Cultural, and Ethical Responses to Rape Victims in the Former Yugoslavia." *Human Rights Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1998): 348–378.
- Seltzer, Mark. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Shandler, Jeffrey. *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Slobodian, Jennifer. "Analyzing the Woman Auteur: The Female/Feminist Gazes of Isabel Coixet and Lucretia Martel." *The Comparatist* 36 (2012): 160–177.
- Steinweiss, Alan E. "The Auschwitz Analogy: Holocaust Memory and American Debates Over Intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 2 (2005): 276–289.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel A., and Onno Van der Hart. "The Intrusive Memory: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 158–182. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Vidal, Belén. "Love, Loneliness and Laudromats: Affect and Artifice in the Melodrama of Isabel Coixet." In *Contemporary Spanish Cinema and Genre*, edited by Jay Beck and Vicente Rodríguez Ortega, 219–238. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008.
- Weitsman, Patricia A. "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda." *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 (2008): 561–578.
- Whitehead, Anne. *Memory*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Zarzosa, Agustín. "Melodrama and the Modes of the World." *Discourse* 32, no. 2 (2010): 236–255.
- Zarzosa, Agustín. *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013.
- Films Cited
- Dead Man* (1995, Jim Jarmusch).
- Dobra Zena/A Good Wife* (2016, Mirjana Karanovic).
- Gori vatra/Fuse* (2003, Pjer Zalica).
- Grbavica/Esma's Secret* (2006, Jasmila Zbanic).
- In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011, Angelina Jolie).
- Kod amidza Idriza/Days and Hours* (2004, Pjer Zalica).
- Viaje al corazón de la tortura/Journey to the Heart of Torture* (2003, Isabel Coixet).