

Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.
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Adam Lowenstein's book, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (2005), is one of the most recent additions to the steadily growing area of academic texts concerned with Trauma Studies. Particularly since the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* in 1996, there has been an inundation of books about memory and witnessing pouring out of university humanities' departments. This leads to the obvious yet often unexamined question that Susan Rubin Suleiman asked at a recent reading of her new book on memory and WWII: What remains to be said about trauma and representation? Is there anything "new" left to say?

Lowenstein's book quickly affirms that there is still more to know about witnessing and its aftermath as he maps out a recent history of international "horror" cinema and the disasters that it attests to in relation to what he calls "shocking representation." Economic in length (the book is only 250 pages), Lowenstein's text considers how various nations' traumatic moments have been viewed in terms of what their filmmakers choose to portray on the cinematic screen, and he questions whether there is a way to transcend the idea of a "national" cinema that would allow contemporary filmic productions to address issues more globally than regionally.

Before going on, we must back up for a moment and ask the important question drawn from the title of Lowenstein's book: What is still shocking these days? For a somewhat sophisticated global audience, the answer may be that there is not much. For example, since the U.S./Vietnam war, Americans have been able to receive grotesque images of war fed straight through the television and into their living rooms. Now, with live feed via the Internet, virtually any well-publicized atrocity can be selected and downloaded in seconds into that same home. The recent Abu Ghraib photos speak for themselves—an almost instantaneous dissemination of these "shocking" photographs occurred as they were viewed on computers around the globe. Yet, at the same time that they were "shocking" to some who never believe any American could be involved in such torture, they were considerably less so for those who have lived through modern warfare. For the latter audience, the images may have been yet another set of horrifying pictures, but nothing terribly "shocking."

What then is the role of "Shocking Representation"? According to Lowen-

stein, to “shock representation” is to attempt to dislodge certain notions of representation from theories intent on prescribing film’s relation to trauma, as well as trauma’s relation to film:

I wish to shock those critical trends within trauma studies that tend to diagnose representation as if it were a patient, where modernist representation is understood as encompassing healthy mourning and integration of working-through, while reality representation is seen as encompassing unhealthy melancholia and denial in the form of acting out. (4)

Lowenstein is searching for a more effective means of representing the space between the modernist and realist projects through a reflection on nationalism and the post-WWII horror film. What ensues, he asks, when we equate the experience of the traumatic victim with something that we call the “unrepresentable” on the presumption that there is experience beyond representation? He answers his own question by saying that “this respect for victims/survivors transforms, paradoxically, into a silencing of both experience and representation” (5). He cautions us that the hegemonic trope of the “unrepresentable experience” runs the risk of overtaking any possibility of enunciating the experience itself. It shuts down rather than opens up the agency of the witness and the process of healing.

Building on this concern, Lowenstein takes on Lyotard’s notion of the *différend*. In particular he refutes the French theorist’s idea that the “irreconcilable nature of conflicting idioms, such as those belonging to Holocaust survivors and to Holocaust deniers, depends upon listening to the silence of one idiom in the face of its refusal to speak in the register of the other” (5). Lowenstein stresses that, with this claim, Lyotard “locks away” the possibility of thinking new idioms for the survivor’s experience: “[...Lyotard] locks away survivor trauma inside an authentic moment in the past, free from the perilous present of cultural negotiation demanded by representation. What is preserved in such a move is the unquestionable authenticity of survivor experience; what is lost, I would contend, is the full possibility of that experience shaping our contemporary world” (5). The question that we must then ask is whether or not Lowenstein extends the possibilities for the survivors of trauma through his reading of cinematic representation. Rather than a choice between either modernist or realist representation, as he posits it, does his own text go beyond traditional binary thought to create something “new” in regards to how we think about the relation between cinema, nationhood, and Trauma Studies in the early 21st century?

Shocking Representation predominantly analyzes the work of five filmmakers: Georges Franju (France), Michael Powell (Britain), Shindo Kaneto (Japan), Wes Craven (U.S.), and David Cronenberg (Canada). Lowenstein

asserts that all of these directors, to some degree, have created “shocking representations” because their films rest on that border between the shocking and often disgusting attributes of the modern horror film alongside a very different genre: art film. (It should be noted that the latter is a genre that is thought to be diametrically opposed to the former) (6). Of note is the fact that Lowenstein does not ask whether or not a film should be categorized as a horror film, but rather how a film “access[es] discourses of horror to confront the representation of historical trauma tied to the film’s national and cultural context” (9). He then notes parallels between national disasters and their connection to the way that we picture the nation: “It is unthinkable to address the idea (or perhaps the desire for the idea) of contemporary ‘Britain’ without the Blitz, of contemporary ‘Japan’ without Hiroshima, and of contemporary ‘America’ without Vietnam. This book examines each of these cases in order to challenge assumptions concerning how historical trauma becomes mapped onto national identity, particularly in relation to the concept of national cinema” (10).

Of five chapters in total, the first four consider how to represent “historical trauma without taking refuge in the comforting myths of national identity” through an international sampling of horror film (147). Of these, Chapter 3, “Unmasking Hiroshima: Demons, Human Beings, and Shindo Kaneto’s *Onibaba*,” is especially noteworthy. It is an interesting discussion about Japanese cinema made in reaction to, and in contemplation of, events in the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima. Kaneto’s film *Onibaba*, which was released in 1964, is set in fourteenth-century Japan. The plot centers on the story of two women who kill Samurai for their armor and who dispose of the bodies in a large hole in order to survive the “war-torn fourteenth century Japan” (86). When the younger woman tries to leave with a man, the older woman tries to trick her into staying by putting on the mask of a fallen Samurai and speaking to her through the mask. Yet the mask is cursed and it eventually “fuses with the old woman’s face, and when it is finally removed, scars reminiscent of atomic radiation burns disfigure her skin” (87).

Onibaba, which literally means “demon hag,” is a cultural allusion to the atomic bomb which in postwar Japan was thought of as an evil spirit or demon (94). Putting this film into dialogue with films directed by two other great Japanese filmmakers, Oshima Nagisa and Kurosawa Akira, Lowenstein asserts that *Onibaba* is a film which rethinks “how relations between film and the representation of trauma are mapped” in Japan (83). He reads *Onibaba* as an allegorical representation of Hiroshima bereft of any “explicit reference” to the event itself. In Japanese post-WWII cinema, realism is much more respected than allegory, and the representation of the “victim” in particular was a shift of post-Hiroshima cinema. *Onibaba* refutes popular views of the Japanese *hibakusha* (Hiroshima atomic bomb victim) that were depicted in

cinema and offers a rethinking of “woman” and “victim” in cinema. It insists that “neither war responsibility nor war victimization can be the exclusive province of ‘ordinary’ Japanese subject or the ‘extraordinary’ elite” (89). Hence, the film marks the potential for a new idiom through which the Japanese might understand Hiroshima.

Moving to the other side of the world, perhaps the most notable reading of film is in Lowenstein’s concluding section, Chapter 5, entitled, “Trauma and Nation Made Flesh: David Cronenberg and the Foundations of the Allegorical Moment.” Here he concentrates on the well-known filmmaker who has an established reputation for his dark and eerie and sometimes crass films. Lowenstein sets up a discussion between *Shivers* (1975) and *Crash* (1986) to look at how they negotiate the line between Canadian and American nationalisms and the way that the two countries think about traumatic events.

Cronenberg, a native of Toronto, began to work during a surge in English Canadian nationalism that was fervent in the 1960s and 70s (148). The connection between Cronenberg’s films and his native Canada are not made explicit by Lowenstein, so in the case of this final chapter, the author appears to see the director not as a final link in the chain of films about particular national traumas, but rather as a filmmaker whose work transcends national borders and opens onto new ways of considering the relation between horror films, trauma, and a postmodern conception of nation.

Crash is a film in which Cronenberg brings together genre and art film, and in doing this attempts to break down “the viewer’s expectations of classical Hollywood cinema” (167). It is a film that deals with pleasure and pain, and which brings up the history of the famous car crashes of people such as James Dean, Jayne Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, and even Princess Diana (though it occurred in 1997, one year after *Crash* was released) (171). By crossing sex with violence, the film asserts that the two become indistinguishable from “the lifeless daily grind of work” (168). As such, there are no assurances as to what normalcy is. There is no moral base. It is only the violent moment of the impact (be it sexual or technological) that excites the characters. According to Lowenstein, “It is made deliberately unclear whether the violence aimed at transforming the self is destructive or beneficial—only the terrifying *need* for self-transformation cannot be denied” (168). Lowenstein invokes Baudrillard to question whether in the future technology will somehow provide humans with “undreamed-of means” for “tapping [their] own psychopathologies” (168). Whether or not the film is escapist or utopian is yet to be decided, but with each new crash there is a new reading of the film, and possibly a new language in which to understand it.

To conclude, *Shocking Representation* is a clearly written think-piece on lesser addressed relations in cinema. Lowenstein’s book opens up a space for

further study of the relations between popular culture, aesthetics, and politics through the horror genre. Overall, his approach seems to grow stronger conceptually as he moves through the book. The last chapter on Cronenberg is by far the most compelling section of the text and may act as a jumping off point for his next book. The greatest weakness of the book may be that Lowenstein has drawn on theorists to support ideas or break down misconceptions, but he never takes these ideas far enough, leading to a repetitious reiteration of the same theoretical moment. Still, it is a welcome addition to a field that seems to have been over-written in the last ten years.

Thus, we must return to questions considered at the beginning of the essay: Can a sort of “shock therapy” be applied to the contemporary film-going public or is a film just a film? Is the horror film the place that the general public now goes to understand, or observe, nationalism at play? In other words, can cinema be therapeutic? Adam Lowenstein may not have the answer to these questions, but he does show that there are still idioms to be brought forth.

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