

Amit Pinchevski, **Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019, 186 pp., \$78.00 (hardcover).

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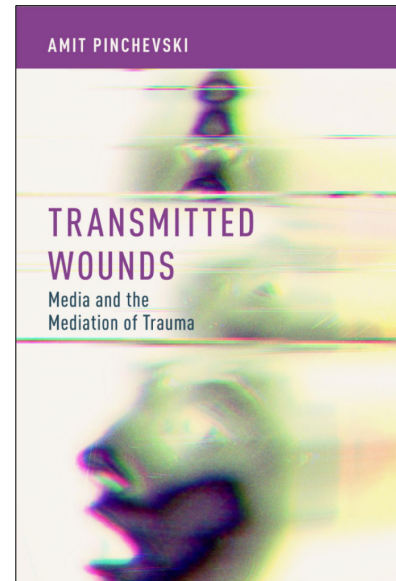
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How do media shape the performance, experience, and conceptualization of trauma? Amit Pinchevski's *Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma* pulls media to the center of trauma theory to demonstrate how advances in media technologies generate new ways of performing and understanding trauma.

Trauma defies borders between communicable and incommunicable, physical and psychological, or individual and collective (Luckhurst, 2008). Resisting narration, trauma's relationship to communication is one of barriers, interruptions, and communicative breaks. As the author defines it, "Trauma is the painful experience of the mind's inability to remediate failed mediation" (p. 5). He argues that the mediation of these obstacles is essential to the ethical engagement of trauma. Thus, trauma scholars must move from representation to mediation to ask not how trauma becomes media content, but how media provide the material conditions to capture the nonnarrative, nondiscursive, and nonhermeneutic aspects of trauma.

As historian Dominick LaCapra (2001/2014) rightly notes, "No genre or discipline 'owns' trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it" (p. 96). Pinchevski adeptly blends psychoanalysis, memory studies, and media studies in *Transmitted Wounds*. Sigmund Freud's notion of trauma as a breach of the "protective shield" against stimuli (p. 5) meets familiar figures from memory studies, such as Marianne Hirsch (postmemory), Allison Landsberg (prosthetic memory), and Andreas Huyssen (Holocaust memory). Media studies have a surprisingly strong "trauma thread" running through its theories as well (p. 12). Walter Benjamin, who describes media's role in the traumatic shock of modernity, and Marshall McLuhan, who describes post-traumatic media as extensions of man with numbing properties, are both part of this thread. However, Pinchevski favors the work of Friedrich Kittler, an important German theorist who remains understudied in English-speaking circles (Winthrop-Young & Gane, 2006).

Kittler offers Pinchevski a posthumanist approach to media technology and a bridge to psychoanalysis. While the oft-cited McLuhan teases ideas of radical posthumanism, man ultimately remains at the center of his work and media as but extensions of man. Kittler, on the other hand, centers technology in his theoretical thinking and views media as transforming humankind through its material structures (Gane, 2005). Kittler



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argues that media transform people's *Aufschreibesysteme*, or discourse networks. Most helpful for Pinchevski, Kittler draws on Jacques Lacan's discussion of the symbolic (representation through symbols), imaginary (figuration through images), and real (pre- and nonsymbolic utterances of physical reality). The real entails trauma's "unassimilable" corporeality that exists outside and sometimes disrupts the symbolic (p. 15). *Traumatography*, Pinchevski's term, refers to the study of these inscriptions of trauma's indexical trace and subsequent recall (p. 9). Kittler's Lacan-informed approach to media acts as the spine of *Transmitted Wounds*, as it speaks to different media's "distinctive configurations of minds, technologies, and bodies" (p. 18).

Following the theoretical work of the introduction, five analytical chapters introduce various media technologies—radio, videotape, film, television, digital screens, holograms, and virtual reality—to highlight their unique mediation of trauma. Three of these chapters engage the mediation of that paragon of contemporary collective trauma, the Holocaust. Pinchevski begins with the 1961 radio broadcast of the Eichmann trial in Israel, which for many Israelis was the first significant public engagement with the trauma of the Holocaust and its survivors. A mix of live broadcasts and daily courtroom recaps, the radio media event transformed survivors' incommunicative traumatized bodies into liberated disembodied speech that nevertheless carried trauma's trace in the "corporeal markers of vocalicity" and the materiality of the courtroom setting (p. 18).

The second and fourth chapters engage recorded Holocaust testimonies via videotape and hologram, respectively. Set against one another, media move from acting as conveyors or performers of trauma narratives to harbingers of trauma algorithms. Yale's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, begun in the late 1970s, illustrates how the audio-visual medium of videotape captures the unarticulated in visual and aural ways. Interestingly, the author argues that it is the project's minimization of the visual (e.g., primarily a fixed camera, neutral studio, focus on witness sans interviewer) that "[amplifies] the puncturing details of speech—gestures, postures, expressions, pauses, silence" (p. 51). In this way, the videotaped testimony underscores the chasm between the said and unsaid as it "performs the Real that it inadvertently captures" (p. 54).

Moving to digital media, chapter four examines the holographic New Dimensions in Testimony project. Prompted by voice input, an algorithm selects the most appropriate option from a database of prerecorded responses to produce a "time-offset interaction" with a three-dimensional holographic projection of the survivor (p. 92). Although the project promises an immersive interaction, it ultimately fractures the traumatic experience into discrete parts, renders the real into the symbolic through database labels, and risks reducing trauma narratives into transferable data. Pinchevski finds algorithmic-holographic testimony to be "deeply problematic" (p. 91) because the difficulty and pain of recounting trauma—silences, bodily cues, and the performance of trauma—are removed from the act of witnessing. As he writes, "If television and videotape were the media a priori for perceiving the impinging of trauma upon testimony, algorithm and holography are the media a priori of the removal of trauma from testimony" (p. 96).

While certainly justified and effective, the Holocaust's disproportionate representation may come across to some readers as a missed opportunity to engage more diverse examples. Chapters 3 and 5 nicely juxtapose one another, demonstrating the possibilities of media to both inflict and heal trauma, but set against the unity of the Holocaust chapters, these additions stand more as an aside to the book's main thread. Chapter 3 considers the capacity of film, television, and digital screens to transmit trauma to viewers. The first is discussed within the limited scope of experimental research, but the latter two appear more consequential with

examples such as the September 11 attacks and U.S. Air Force drone operators. Collectively, these cases demonstrate “the progressive distantiating-through-visualization of trauma by technical means” (p. 68). In contrast, chapter 5 considers immersive virtual reality as a “brazenly future-oriented” (p. 116) form of exposure therapy acting as a technological cure and possibly a preemptive treatment for PTSD. Like algorithmic-holographic testimony, VR’s digitization—its rendering of discrete, modular, manipulable elements—transforms trauma again by forcing the traumatic real into the symbolic to create algorithm-capable data. Whereas the logic of digitization is a severe limitation for testimony, there is perhaps more promise in its use as a therapeutic alternative to talk therapy.

This is not Pinchevski’s first foray into the fringe of communicability. In his first monograph, *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication*, Pinchevski (2005) presents a Levinasian ethics of alterity by advocating that the communication discipline ceases its emphasis on the said (that which is addressed in language) to the exclusion of the saying (the “signification of signification itself”; p. 10). Replacing Levinas with Lacan and Kittler, *Transmitted Wounds* prioritizes a technological argument with roots in his coedited volume, *Media Witnessing* (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009). In this book, Pinchevski moves beyond the task of defining media witnessing to instead unpack the mediation of trauma. More specifically, he works to understand how media “[partake] in the very construction of the traumatic itself” (p. 3) rather than merely responsible for its representation.

Given Pinchevski’s interest in the nondiscursive aspects of trauma and the various relationships among minds, technologies, and bodies, *Transmitted Wounds* begs to be put in conversation with affect theory. Like trauma, affect similarly speaks to an “inbetween-ness” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1) and refers to “a state of embodied experience that is in tension with language and is always rendered discursive in a deferred manner” (Johanssen & Garrisi, 2019, p. 465). Almost as a precursor to Pinchevski’s particular mediation problem, affect theory explains the connections and tensions between mind and body, specifically the unmediated aspects that struggle to find narration. Pinchevski works to understand how media may capture these struggles and mediate the unmediated. Therefore, grounding *Transmitted Wounds* in affect scholarship would help illuminate the real that Pinchevski takes as his starting point.

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