The Weight of Meaninglessness

NAIDA ZUKIĆ
BMCC, CUNY Manhattan, USA

Abstract: The Weight of Meaninglessness is a video performance that evokes the atrocities of the recent Bosnian history in an effort to highlight the ethical urgencies, complexities and paradoxes of externalising trauma within a site that collapses meaning and creates possibilities for the return of traumatic memory. The performance shows the artist violently and continuously scrubbing clean her permanently marked arm, withstanding bodily pain and struggling to breathe. The video also confronts the viewer with Srebrenica Genocide; the images of mass graves render the memory of the atrocity traumatising in its insufferable intensity. In the moment of examining trauma and locating its agency, the artist lays bare the paradox of violent memories that can only be externalised through inflicting violence on oneself. The artist's essay addresses the historical and ideological conditions under which *The Weight of* Meaninglessness critiques and exercises violence.

Keywords: abject aesthetics, ethics of responsibility, trauma, agency, psychoanalysis

[My weight of meaninglessness] – a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, ... harries me as something radically separate, loathsome. ... A weight of meaninglessness about which there is nothing insignificant and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.

(Kristeva 1980, 2)

The Weight of Meaninglessness[1] presents the artist as the object of the performance. The aesthetics of the artist's arm are deployed as a performative medium highlighting trauma/tised agency, ethics, and responsibility. More specifically, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' shows the artist violently and continuously scrubbing clean her permanently marked arm, withstanding bodily pain, as well as struggling to breathe. The artist confronts the viewer with Srebrenica Genocide; the images of mass graves render the memory of the

---

[1] Country: US; Language: English; Release Date: 3 March 2009 (USA); Runtime: 5:00 min; Sound Mix: Stereo; Colour: Colour; Aspect Ratio: 16:9; Language: English; Format: Video NTSC.

atrocity traumatising in its insufferable intensity. 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' occupies and transcends the extremity of consciousness that is war (trauma). Against the background of the modern Bosnian history, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' highlights the ethical urgencies, complexities, and paradoxes of externalising trauma within a space that collapses meaning and creates possibilities for the return of traumatic memory. Aesthetic devices deployed in the project are framed within Julia Kristeva's phenomenology of the abject that recognises abjection as subversive. Thus, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' signifies agency and the politics of psychological dislocations associated with traumatic experiences.

Kristeva's abject is foregrounded as the theoretical terrain that shapes the traumatic memory of the recent Bosnian conflict, and the collective, unsituated expression of abjection manifested in the trauma discourse surrounding the Srebrenica Genocide. Srebrenica Genocide remains the scene of the gravest atrocity in Modern Europe since the Second World War. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on 11 July 1995 under the watch of the U.N. 8,100 Bosniak men and boys were executed at the hands of Serb forces, who overran the U.N. 'safe heaven' of Srebrenica.

The practice of signifying trauma is paradoxical in its abjection and instability. Consequently, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' accounts for methodological and ethical crisis posed by externalising/narrating traumatic memory (i.e. signifying subjects of abjection). It asks a viewer (and a reader) to consider what might power/resistance relationship look like in a trauma event. The production of trauma narratives, including their re/inscription and depoliticisation, is a performative practice central to structures of power and as such demands to be historically and politico-ideologically situated. This view also proposes that practices of externalising trauma reproduce relations of power. In *Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Judith Butler submits a psychoanalytical and paradoxical theory of power that further complicates issues orbiting trauma/tic representations: 'To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonising form power takes. To find, however, that what "one" is, one's very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another' (Butler 1997, 1-2).

'The Weight of Meaninglessness' is offered as an aesthetic of radical vulnerability, and an ontological evaluation of traumatic abjection as a condition for possibility and critical agency. Traumatic memory *accessed* via the aesthetic deployed rests upon the violently dehumanised figure of the abject; it thematises the uncanny return of the 'unspeakable', non-symbolisable truth, the repressed traumatic (memory) – 'the informe' (Bataille 1970, 219). The abjected space of traumatic memory, in its ambiguity and 'formlessness' is essentially not accessible to her own subject. As such, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' elicits performance art (in face of theorisation) as a conceptual mode of accessing the subject's 'unmarked performance of the Real' always partially phantasmic in its abjected representations (Phelan 1993, 180). The subject's encounter with the traumatic 'real', paradoxically enables survival in its amplification of the trauma. 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' engages the significance of the traumatic phantasmic as estranging in its political resonances and its ambiguous (abject aesthetic) intimacies.

Strange Encounters

> *The concept of the testimony, speaking from the standpoint of superimposition of literature, psychoanalysis, and history, is in fact quite unfamiliar and estranging.*
>
> (Felman and Laub 1992, 7)

According to Feud, it takes two to witness the unconscious (1994). The burden of the unconscious witnessing is a radically unique and solitary burden that bears responsibility of that solitude. Freud's theory of the unconscious testimony speaks to the significance of reflective and pointed materialising of the begotten and unconscious evidence into the realm of consciousness. 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' culls from Freud's dream narrative to summon trauma aesthetic and discourse that are psychoanalytical, philosophical, and historical in their implications. Evidencing the unconscious at once constitutes, reflects and reinscribes trauma. Permeated with intentionality, the practice of externalising historic trauma involves a conscious appropriation and contouring of cultural memory. Understood in this sense, the practice of materialising trauma reflects, reinforces, and responds to dynamic shifts in political, historical, and cultural milieus. As such, the production of discourse (textualising trauma) demands rigorous and critical contextualisation of that textualisation.

It is no accident that 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' reflects the polyphony of contexts that simultaneously articulate, repress and decentralise the 'meta' in unconscious witnessing. The scrutiny of 'the very tension between textualisation and contextualisation' might yield new avenues of insight, both into the texts at stake and into their contexts (Felman and Laub 1992, xv). The unconscious evidencing of traumatic encounter and the precarious politico-ideological situatedness of the witness, position the viewer/reader of 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' as the spectator/critic, invited to engage with the ethics of responsibility (always ideologically determined). 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' speaks to various experiences of witnessing trauma, and the extent to which the abject and the 'lacuna' of the traumatic event are reflected in the performative ethos of the witness herself. Reflected in the project's aesthetic approach are politico-ideological, paradoxical relations of the traumatic performative witness/the speaking subject, to the abject.

'The Weight of Meaninglessness' invites various modes of scrutiny and exploration to such an extent that externalising and transcending trauma/witnessing becomes possible. It is against the background of the conceptual and methodological paradox of representing the psychic violence and trauma, that 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' contextualises The Srebrenica Genocide as a form of modern, sanctioned, and institutionalised trauma discourse. Aesthetic politics of performative devices deployed in 'The Weight of Meaninglessness', highlight the tensions embedded in the practice of documenting trauma and the witnessing of the unconscious – bearing witness to the 'unspeakable truth' that dehumanises the subject – and the consequent performative production of the unmarked abject. The deconstructionist ontology of the project's performative politics, thus, accounts for the problem of imitation and the reproduction of the violent phantasmic.

'The Weight of Meaninglessness' engages traumatic memory as a concept that is unwittingly (paradoxically) testimonial and yet resists theorising. Traumatic memory is offered as a medium for aesthetic, theoretical, and political transmission, and as a medium for the repe-

tition of violence. Nevertheless, the irreducible particularities of its politicised trauma aesthetics invite a nuanced and hybridised psycho-historical practices of reading 'The Weight of Meaninglessness', all of which reveal history, culture, and politics as 'precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas' (Caruth 1996, 24). Such practices of reading attend to different/traumatic subject positions, the best operating procedures of access(ibility), and the role of social (even natural) sciences in relation to politico-ideological approaches to trauma aesthetics. Construed within the referentiality of these implications is the key notion of 'un-readability' (La Capra 1994) of trauma, perpetually lost/located in dubious and ambivalent works of translation. Hence, the aesthetic politics of 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' perform the instability of trauma which remains unlocatable in any particular individual. The project also acknowledges false dichotomies implicit within political allure of the symbolic, emphasising the gaps, the ruptures, and the risks of its political appeal. The aesthetic devices deployed in 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' touch the limits of the symbolic, where representational politics at once de/stabilises, conceals, fetishises, and reveals its agentic powers. To frame the agentic aesthetic of the 'Weight of Meaninglessness' in this way is to underscore epistemological and ontological problems of framing war and its traumatic effects. The aesthetic capacity of 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' to respond to politically saturated 'frames' (i.e., media, discourse, statistics, and images) is contextualised within ideological and cultural instruments of power that establish and regulate ethical dispositions and the distinction between 'grievable and ungrievable lives' (Butler 2010). The aesthetic frames of the performance seek to locate the political voice of the radically ungrievable populations who are the targets of war and whose lives, as Judith Butler notes,

> cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed. To destroy them actively might even seem like kind of redundancy, or a way of simply ratifying a prior truth (Butler 2010, xix).

'The Weight of Meaninglessness', thus, positions political voice, agency, ethics, and responsibility in the context of 'un/grievability' and trauma discourses. It is a site for re/thinking power, human rights violations, and subjectivity.

'The Weight of Meaninglessness' acknowledges the limits of theoretical framings of agency and trauma, the concepts which cannot be completely captured by language. The performance highlights the paradoxical nature of signifying that which resists signification; it aims to problematise the phantasms of agency located within theoretical frameworks of trauma discourse, and to politicise trauma discourse in its very impossibility of marking it and addressing it directly. Most importantly, the aesthetic devices deployed in 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' unsettle the practice of documenting human rights abuses as paradoxical inasmuch as subjectivities are both constituted through and violated by such representational gestures.

Traumatising Performative Apparatus of Power

> *In its birth into the symbolic or social order, into language, the subject is formed around, and through a veiling of, that which cannot be symbolised - the traumatic real. The real is traumatic and has to be hidden or forgotten, because it is a threat to imaginary completeness of the subject. The 'subject' only exists as far as the person finds their place within the social or symbolic order.*
>
> (Edkins 2003, 12)

What can we make of the practice of signifying trauma that not only constitutes the limit of critical agency but is itself repeatedly constituted in the traumatic abjection of the subject? Returning to 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' as a site of performative trauma presupposes trauma not as a single violation against the subject. Rather, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' suggests that trauma is a status incessantly reproduced through its compulsion to repeat the violent act. Psycho-historical contexts within which the project situates the traumatic abjection of the subject (but also the subjection of the abject) must take the productive aesthetics of power as seriously as they do politico-ideological discourse of power. Within the context of 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' the aesthetic approach/methodologies and the context of the psyche are distinguished as political shifts towards unsettling, advancing, and integrating methodologies of exteriority and interiority.

'The Weight of Meaninglessness' articulates the traumatic abjection and its relationship to political power (i.e. critical agency). It foregrounds the political agency of the abject and in so doing undercuts any imagination of an autonomous, unified, and self-determined subject in her appeal to agency. Instead, 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' explores the psychic dynamics of power and agency that navigate between socio-political and historic zones of the subject, and the psychic realm of the abject. Equally central to the performative politics of this aesthetic are the effects that trauma (externalising) produces within the circuits of psychic and sovereign forms of power. The signifying practices at once reinsert the abjected subject of trauma into the political structures of power to create spaces for their political voice and critical agency. While traumatic events cannot be externalised via language (i.e. power relations are produced and normalised through language, which is always already political and ideological in its most elemental form), the productive (state) power relies on the unspeakable, unimaginable, hence silenced/hidden experiences of trauma that threaten the very stability of power.

The psycho-historical reading of 'The Weight of Meaninglessness' allows for ethics of responsibility that scrutinise the politics orbiting the questions of human rights abuses. The paradoxical quality of 'subjectivation' implies the performative preservation of attachment to trauma and loss as the condition for possibility and critical agency. The psycho-historical/aesthetic framing of the embodied trauma in the 'Weight of Meaninglessness', locates agency in compulsion to perform violence against herself. Most importantly, it is the performative movement between language and the body that presupposes the limit of critical agency and unsettles the performative ideological guises that foreclose subjectivity.

References

Bataille, Georges. 'L'Abjection et les formes misérables', in *Oeuvres Complètes 2,* edited by Paris Gallimard, 1970, p. 219.

Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

——————. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable.* London: Verso, 2010.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. 'Foreword', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. xiii-xx.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams.* New York: Modern Library Edition, 1994.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing The Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma.* New York: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance.* London: Routledge, 1993.

NAIDA ZUKIĆ is assistant professor in the Department of Speech, Communication and Theatre Arts at BMCC, CUNY Manhattan. She is a New York-based, Bosnian born Communication and Performance Studies scholar and a Butoh artist. Zukić's most recent aesthetic and theoretical analyses develop a critique of anonymous/objective/ethical violence in an effort to formulate theories of subjectivity, ethics, and responsibility. [nzukic@bmcc.cuny.edu]