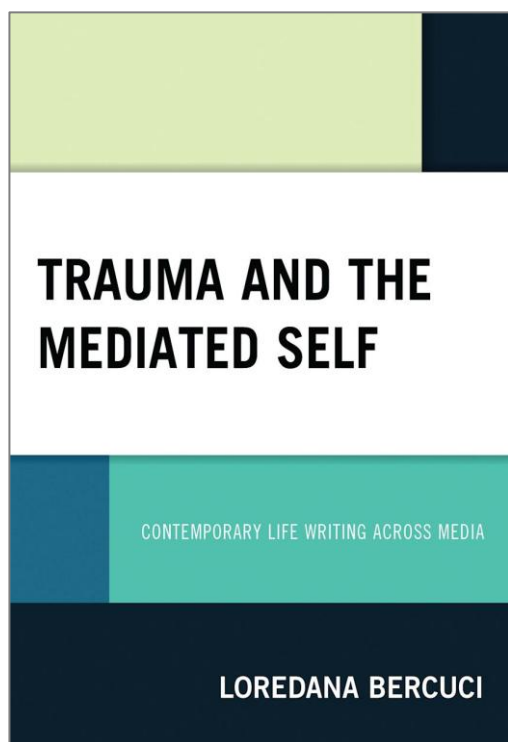


BOOKS

Loredana Bercuci, *Trauma and the Mediated Self: Contemporary Life Writing Across Media*, London: Lexington Books, 2024, 205 p.



It is more than enough for an individual to wake up in the morning, pick up the phone – as many do –, or turn on the TV, as others do, gasp and tremble at yet another tragedy. An accident, a murder, another suicide. Genocides, war, and killing sprees. As we scroll down and button up, the distance between us grows, until we can breathe again, speak again, and shout, “It is not me! It is not me!” It could never be us. But trauma has a daily routine. It awaits. It waits beside the crib, under the classroom table, around the corner, in the arms of the loved one. It lurks in trenches, shops, and open fields. It consumes.

Much as it absorbs us, trauma is also present in the things that we like to consume ourselves, be they books, movies, or other types of entertainment. In her book, *Trauma and the Mediated Self: Contemporary Life Writing Across Media*, Loredana Bercuci dives exactly into this topic. She explores the various means of trauma representation in contemporary media, by bringing together autobiographical works and including printed-word memoirs, graphic memoirs, autodocumentaries, and autobiographical video games. She analyses the particularities of each representation, fostering a complex conversation between the notion of memory and the implications of



trauma. Moreover, the author observes and disseminates the creation of a new type of aesthetics, as a result of different media foregrounding various representations of trauma. She emphasizes the extent to which customization of each category ends up generating distinct representations of trauma, which result in multiple trauma aesthetics.

Divided into four chapters, *Trauma and the Mediated Self* provides a comprehensive view of how trauma and memory have been perceived throughout time, up until the 21st century. An important part of the text is dedicated to the analysis of contemporary written and visual works. It is not just the author's investigation as a researcher that forms the nucleus of the book. The chosen ways and the style in which she conveys the information make the book not only informative, but also genuinely enjoyable. She manages to create an eclectic illustration of events, as the research work per se is framed and introduced by recalling some of the best-known events embedded in collective memory. Thus, Bercuci creates a space wherein events such as the Monica Lewinsky case, the Holocaust, or 9/11 provide both the background and the foundation for the analyses that follow.

The first chapter, "Trauma, Memory, Life Writing, and the Mediated Self in Contemporary Culture", brings together some of the most prominent theories on memory and its relationship to traumatic events and individual experiences. Drawing on illustrious theorists of memory and trauma, the author offers vivid illustration of the changes these concepts have undergone throughout time. To construct this timeline, she starts from Plato and the metaphor of the clay tablet, highlighting the evolution of the topic of trauma up to the present, when this notion has become quintessential to popular public discourse. The chapter opens as follows: "The workings of culture are often best revealed in its most popular forms" (13). This explains the standpoint from which the researcher constructs her arguments, while acting as a constant reminder. Throughout the book, the reader is shown that what represents human beings does not lie in novelty or rarity, but rather in the common, the enjoyable, and the accessible.

The remaining chapters propose case studies of four distinct types of media that enjoy popularity in the autobiographical writing market. In the second part, "Trauma and the Memoir Boom", Bercuci discusses three printed-word memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011) by Joan Didion, accompanied by Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013). While each chapter dives into a different medium, the first analysis also illustrates the more traditional approach to autobiographical trauma writing, which will be challenged in the chapters to follow. The strategic corpus choice supports the author's plan to highlight the complexities of trauma dissemination via the written word.

Besides the intricacies of the trauma-related content itself, Bercuci also discusses the recent "memoir boom", opening a broader discussion as to the spectrum of autobiographical writing. Thus, among others, she mentions texts such as the bestseller *The Glass Castle* (2005) by Jeannette Walls, while also tracing the popular genre of Middle Eastern memoirs, with notable examples such as *Reading Lolita in*

Tehran: A Memoir in Books (2003) by Azar Nafisi, or the graphic memoir, *Persepolis* (2007), by Marjane Satrapi. Apart from them, she includes a comprehensive list of other popular movements in autobiographical writing, such as celebrity memoirs (54), feminist writings (55), or AIDS/HIV memoirs (55-56).

In the third chapter, "Trauma in Graphic Memoirs", the author analyzes four popular graphic memoirs, namely *Maus* (1986,1991) by Art Spiegelman, *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel, *Stitches* (2010) by David Small and, last but not least, *Vietnamerica* (2011) by GB Tran. If the previous chapter focuses primarily on printed-word memoirs, this one brings forth the challenges and outcomes of visually transmitting traumatic events, environments, or experiences. As they capture both personal and collective traumas, the selected titles generate a complex survey of traumatic representations. Bercuci expertly creates a parallel between pioneering graphic novels, Spiegelman's *Maus* and Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and their successors, *Stitches* and *Vietnamerica*. If the former have been embedded in collective memory as epitomes of the genre, constructing an ideal medium for collective and personal trauma alike, the reader now discovers how David Small and BG Tran's approaches are innovative, as "each brings strategies of their own to represent the particular type of trauma they approach" (117).

The fourth chapter, "Trauma in Autobiographical Documentaries", references three autodocumentaries, Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012), Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* (2015), and Val Kilmer's *A24 Val* (2021). They shift the focus to a different medium, as the printed word is left behind and replaced with an entirely visual approach to memory and trauma. The three documentaries' different director approaches and Bercuci's layered analysis thereof construe a broad picture of the various techniques that may be adopted in the field. For instance, the author describes Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* as "taking a completely different form from the trauma narratives discussed in the previous chapters" (10), whereas the others bring their own contribution through visual metaphors or explorations of symptomatology.

In "Trauma in Autobiographical Video Games", the fifth and final chapter, the focus is on two video games: *Father and I* (2012), designed by Vander Cabarello as a retelling of his childhood memories of abuse within his family, and *That Dragon, Cancer* (2017), by Amy and Ryan Green, in which the family environment becomes a place of struggle following the cancer diagnosis of the one-year-old son. This innovative approach to trauma and memory transforms representation into a dynamic and interactive experience. The challenge of recalling trauma in an experimental format generates a new perspective, which distances itself from previous approaches while also reinforcing the relationship between trauma, memory, and media.

In *Trauma and the Mediated Self: Contemporary Life Writing Across Media*, Loredana Bercuci manages to reunite different environments in which trauma and its outcomes can be explored. From printed-word and graphic memoirs to autodocumentaries and videogames, the author provides a comprehensive perspective on how popular entertainment can express such a sensitive and pervasive topic of the

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21st century as trauma. Focusing on this widely discussed subject in and of itself, and placing it in the context of multiple theories on social media emerging from both experts and individuals, this book sheds light to how trauma functions in the collective mind and how popular culture can serve as a tool for both coping with and understanding trauma.

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