

Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research  
Volume 13 Number 3

© 2015 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/tear.13.3.315\_1

---

**ANNA WALKER**  
Plymouth University

# The body in between, the dissociative experience of trauma

## ABSTRACT

*In 'The autonomy of the affect' Brian Massumi wrote of the gap between affective and cognitive registering of the traumatic experience. Affect theorists and neuroscientists have long shared the notion of a gap between the somatic response to a traumatic event and the appraisal of the affective situation. This article develops theories on dissociation or nothingness, where nothingness is a measurement of the space between the affective and the cognitive registering of a traumatic event. It explores the concept of two different systems, one a 'conscious automatic' system and the other an 'intensity system' that exists outside of normal physiological sequencing, beyond narration, and therefore incapable of integrating into memory systems.*

## KEYWORDS

Derrida  
Massumi  
trauma  
dissociation  
memory  
ghosts

A specter is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and non-phenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance. The spectral logic is de facto a deconstructive logic. It is in the element of haunting that deconstruction finds the place most hospitable to it, at the heart of the living present, in the quickest heart – beat of the philosophical. Like the work of mourning, in a sense, which produces spectrality, and like *all* work produces spectrality.

(Derrida and Steigler 2002: 117, original emphasis)

Within the dissociative or disembodied space, cognitive perception is blinded and therefore narration challenged; memories become ghosts returning to haunt both the body and the field that the body occupies. This 'in between body' is a body consumed by the past where spirit is the ghost that returns after the event, the spectral resonance held within the memory (Derrida 1989). The film, *Ghosts: Bodies Caught in Between*, (Walker, 2015) (6.49 minutes, 2015) was completed earlier this year in an effort to describe the ghostly presence within the haunted space. It contributes to research that explores the memories of a traumatic past, tracing the 'affect' of a traumatic event on a body – in this instance, the event of 9/11 on my body. The research is a personal unravelling or excavation of memory as navigated through a diary that I wrote at the time of the event and the collective cultural memory of 9/11 resourced through Internet archives such as Youtube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)).

**DESCRIPTION: GHOSTS: BODIES CAUGHT IN BETWEEN (WALKER, 2015)**

The footage is shot in black and white and moves from an underground subway in New York through the remains of the fallen World Trade Center. It is edited together from hundreds of hours of footage and imagery from YouTube and filmed with a macro-lens directly from the computer screen. The film is accompanied by the distorted sounds from footage clippings of the day of 9/11 and days thereafter. The film is an interconnected, complex layering of imagery, voice and sounds that portray the breaking down of a traumatic memory into stuttering and isolated fragments, and contributes to an examination of the ongoing belief, contained within the journal and throughout the twelve years preceding this research, that the day's events of 9/11 unfolded noiselessly. In the making of this film and others I was to discover or rediscover the sounds of the day's events, in particular the noise of Twin Towers falling, which I had remembered as falling silently, noise that functioned as a bridge between the cognitive and affective registering of this traumatic event.



Figure 1: *Ghosts: Bodies Caught in Between* (Walker, 2015).

This piece of work contributes to a larger body of research that analyses the place where a traumatic event meets memory. Memory within this context is perceived as crucial to understanding oneself socially, culturally and personally, while trauma is understood as an experience borne by the act of leaving wherein the mind's coping mechanism is overwhelmed by shocking external events. The intensity of the experience leads to difficulties integrating the memory where forgetting the event is impossible and any form of recollection inadequate. As Roth wrote in 2012, trauma from a modernist perspective points to an occurrence that both demands representation and yet refuses to be represented (2012: 93). Traumatic memories here are seen as detached memories that, although fixed historically in a specific time and place, become unwieldy anchors for a body that is neither here (in the present) nor there (in the past). I am interested in this paradox from philosophical and psychoanalytical perspectives – the latent witnessing of traumatic events that defies the assimilation of the past into a narrative and the concept of dissociation, or of not fully inhabiting the experience of the event as it happens. Cathy Caruth described this as 'the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world, an event that, ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness ...' (1996: 4).

Understanding or integrating the past involves naming and substantiating the absence or the gaps in remembering, inhabiting or re-inhabiting the states of dissociation associated with experiencing traumatic events. Lacanian analysts Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière have written of a dissociate truth, a 'cut-out consciousness' (2004: 47) or an unthought known, in which the subject's relationship to history was not so much censored as erased, leaving but a trace in the field or the psyche to facilitate a link to the past, a foothold back into the story that has been reduced to 'nothing'. The research therefore becomes an exploration of the unthought known, an unwinding of the traumatic memory in an effort to narrate the trauma body, the traumatic event and its trace.

Brian Massumi describes a body where

Brain and skin form a resonating vessel. Stimulation turns inward, is folded into the body, except that there is no inside for it to be in, because the body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived, and because the entire vibratory event is unconscious, out of mind.

(1995)

This is the body caught between the affective and the cognitive registering of the traumatic experience, the body in conflict trapped within a 'conscious automatic' system and an 'intensity system'. It is a body in a non-linear process where resonance and affect continue to feedback 'outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function' (Massumi 2002: 25). He describes it as a 'temporal sink, a hole in time', a state of suspense with the potential towards disruption. This body, this site of trauma, is a body in between, a body in crisis caught up in uncertainty where the notion of safety is disrupted, and any organized existence made precarious, a body teetering on the edge haunted by the past.

Within the film *Ghosts: Bodies Caught in Between* the layering of the text and the sounds trace the ebbing and the flowing of the unfolding events of

September 11 2001 forwards into the present and the present future; they are auditory and visual flashbacks, intrusions from the past that rupture the present. The film is part of a larger installation called 'Fragments', which to date is made up of two sound pieces and three moving image pieces. Importantly, the imagery was selected from Internet archives and the sounds were collected from a number of sources including the sites of previous installations of the research, and fragments of the recorded voice reading from the original journal. The repetition of sounds and the imagery are memory's ghostly echo, perhaps – as Derrida wrote – 'to conjure away, as if by magic, the "thing" itself, the fear or the terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing a traumatism and this is true for the repetition of the televised images we will speak of later)' (2003).

For Derrida the spectral notion of trauma is that which is both inscribed on the body from the event and that which is yet to come; it is a body possessed. In 'Of spirit' he wrote 'I shall speak of ghost, of flame, of ashes' (1989: 1) where spirit is a ghost that returns, the material that is left within the traces of memory and representation after the event, or the resonance of an echo within the haunted space, within the accumulation of the fragments of traumatic memories. The ghost throws time out of joint, producing a 'radical untimeliness' or 'anachrony' – the film, slow moving, in and out of focus, purposefully overexposed in parts so much so that details disappear into white space. This is where the past encroaches, breaks open the present and distorts the potential of the future into a series of irreconcilable scenes and multiple feelings and their *affects*. The traumatic experience divided from the beginning is never just one event that is experienced, for trauma splits time. As Andrew Brown writes,

(being neither a 'then' nor a 'now') and meaning (being neither significant nor nonsensical), it is neither pure fact nor pure fantasy, it comes both from within the subject (the endogenous fantasy) and from without (the original scene of seduction, and the second, possibly quite banal event that recalls it).

(1992: 239)

Freud writes about this state as *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action trauma constituted by the relationship between two events or experiences of two competing impulses. Laplanche refers to it as a time of latency or *afterwardsness* (2001). For me it is a shadowy place of survival where the trauma awaits revelation, a challenging place of defence strategies and theatricality where life is lived on the outside to protect the vulnerable and haunted interior. Such a body exists as an unbearable interconnection of matter and potentiality, of organic aesthetic sensitivity and inorganic mechanical reproduction, a body steeped in conflict carrying within itself an impossible history, where the traumatized themselves become, as Caruth wrote, 'the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess' (1995: 1).

For Luckhurst the ghost embodies the idea of the persistence of traumatic memory; ghosts are signals of atrocities marking sites of untold violence; they signal the presence of a traumatic past whose traces remain to attest to a lack of testimony. 'A haunting does not initiate a story; it is the sign of a blockage of the story ... A hurt that has not been honored by a memorializing narrative' (2008: 93). But Derrida's ghosts are not just emanations from the past; they are very much of the present and of a time to come, inhabiting spectral moments

that no longer belong to time (2006: 6–7). Cut out of time (and consciousness) the spectre remains invisible; from this place it witnesses our inability to see it, but it haunts us nevertheless. Unable to identify the ghost's visibility we can, however, choose to fall back upon its voice in an attempt to familiarize ourselves with its ghostly qualities (2006: 12) and know for whence it came, as Derrida wrote just five-weeks after 9/11 – 'we do not know what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it' (2001: 94). The traumatic experience is the constant return to what has not yet arrived, a ghost of or from the future, or the ghostly effect of what is never present.

**DESCRIPTION: *FALLING* (WALKER, 2014)**

*Falling* is a short film of just 1.12 minutes; completed last year it marked a major discovery within the research and functions as a link to connect up the other audio and film works of 'Fragments'. Also filmed with a macro-lens directly from the computer screen, it is a visual rendering of the explosive noise of the towers falling, the loudness of which cannot be contained, the intensity from which there is no escape. Here words have diminished entirely to the pulsating and elongated rawness of sound. There is now no choice but to listen. Denied visibility, this is the ghost making itself heard, a call to the body – *my body* – in between to feel the full affect of the past. The imagery is shot in black and white and flickers from abstract glimpses of a body falling into a digital abyss of clouds, space and form. The sound is an extended and manipulated recording of the Twin Towers collapsing, and was extracted from YouTube footage. The loudness of the sound interrupts the imagery and breaks it apart into further distortion, and still the body falls, never quite landing yet never fully breaking apart. Noise has pierced the boundaries of the past and the present, turning the body inside out, as it falls into a future threatened by the impossible realization of the past.

Remembering has been a slow process, piecing together disparate fragments to prevent being overwhelmed or swallowed up entirely by the memory. The total destruction of the speaking language into these final explosive sounds marks the complete unravelling of the fabric of memory and opens up the potential to reweave the past into a new form that removes the



Figure 2: *Falling* (Walker, 2014).

text, and places its erased form into the present. Current experimentation with the explosive sound links the audio with visuals that are divorced from the actual footage of 9/11 and marked the beginning of a new direction for the research and the beginning of an exploration into Baudrillard's tangled mess of reality and fiction. He described the collapse of the Twin Towers as unimaginable, but as such not enough to make it a real event. He wrote, 'A surplus of violence is not sufficient to make an opening onto reality, because reality is a principle and this principle has been lost' (Baudrillard, 2002: 413).

In theory, ghosts can be laid to rest if they are captured, by that I mean heard, voiced, seen, made visible from the shadows, from the past. But the ghost of 9/11 lingers still, dramatically and paranoically displayed across the media's broadsheets and websites, in the rhetoric used to describe the ongoing War on Terror, and the growing regard of immigrants and refugees as the threatening foreign other. Redemption and prevention are the ghostly attributes that have escalated into yet more violence. As early as 1996 Derrida had named an unprecedented age of war as an age of 'new archaic violence', where revenge and avowed vengeance 'unleashes self-destruction in a desperate (auto-immune) gesture ... to eradicate uprootedness and reappropriate the sacredness of life safe and sound' (Derrida and Steigler 1996: 88). Nineteen years later the spectral still permeates in the call of justified violence and retribution, of black and white ideologies. A war of extremes is still being fought, and we are caught in the collision between the most technologically sophisticated and advanced weapons of the United States and Europe against the primitive atrocities of beheadings, mutilation and rape carried out in the Middle East, all of it played out across our computer screens, in snippets and in sound bites, on repeat, freeze-frame or in slow-motion action sequences.

To finish I leave you with a Toni Morrison quote from *Beloved* about some things you forget and some things you never do –

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.

(2007: 13)

## REFERENCES

- Baudrillard, J. (2002), 'L'Esprit du Terrorisme' (trans. M. Valentin), *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101: 2, Spring, pp. 403–15.
- Brown, A (1992), *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing*, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Caruth, C. (1995), *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, MD and London, UK: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- (1996), *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, MD and London, UK: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. and Laplanche, J. (2001), 'An interview with Jean Laplanche', *Postmodern Culture*, 11: 2, pp. 1–32, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v011/11.2ca](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v011/11.2ca). Accessed 9 April 2012.

- Davoine, F. and Gaudilliere, J. M. (2004), *History Beyond Trauma, Whereof One Cannot Speak, Thereof One Cannot Stay Silent* (trans. S. Fairfield), New York, NY: Other Press.
- Derrida, J. (1989), 'Of spirit', *Critical Inquiry*, 15: 2, Winter, pp. 457–74.
- (2003), 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides. A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida' (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas), in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror, Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, (interviewed by G. Borradori), Chicago, IL and London, UK: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 85–136.
- ([1994] 2006), *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (trans. Peggy Kamuf) (repr. Abingdon), London: Routledge.
- Derrida, J. (2002), 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', in G. Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion*, New York: Routledge, pp. 1–40.
- Derrida, J. and Steigler, B. (2002), 'Spectrographies', in *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews* (trans. Jennifer Bajorek), Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, assoc. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, pp. 113–134.
- Freud, S. ([1895] 1950), *Nachträglichkeit – Project for a Scientific Psychology*, in M. Bonaparte, A. Freud and E. Kris (eds), *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse* 'The origins of psychoanalysis', London, UK: Imago Publishing, pp. 356–466, <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=401>.
- Luckhurst, R. (2008), *The Trauma Question*, Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Massumi, B. (1995), 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique*, No 31, *The Politics of Systems and Environments*, Part II (Autumn), University of Minnesota Press, pp. 83–109, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354446>. Accessed 3 March 2015.
- (2002), *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and London, UK: Duke University Press, p. 25.
- (2010), 'The future birth of the affective fact: The political ontology of threat', in M. Gregg and G. J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, pp. 52–70.
- Morrison, T. (2007), *Beloved*, London, UK: Vintage Classics, p. 13.
- Roth, M. (2012), *Memory, Trauma, And History, Essays on Living with the Past*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Walker, A. (2015), *Ghosts: Bodies Caught in Between*, Devon, UK.
- (2014), *Falling*, Devon, UK.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

- Walker, A. (2015), 'The body in between, the dissociative experience of trauma', *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, 13: 3, pp. 315–322, doi: 10.1386/tear.13.3.315\_1

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Anna Walker is an artist and a writer who has exhibited her work internationally. She has an M.A. in Fine Art from Southampton University (1998) and a certificate in Body-Psychotherapy from CBPC Cambridge (2010). An interest in the effects of trauma on the body, developed during her training as a psychotherapist, led her to Ph.D. research in Arts and Media at Plymouth University, where she is a member of the Arts and Sound Research group.

Contact: School of Art & Media, Faculty of Arts, Plymouth University, UK.  
E-mail: [anna.walker@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:anna.walker@plymouth.ac.uk)

Anna Walker has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---

Copyright of Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.