



## POSTHUMANIST TRAUMA: AN INTRASECTIONAL APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABLE DETERMINACY IN CURRENT NORTH AMERICAN NARRATIVE

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**ABSTRACT.** *How can we deal with trauma in a posthuman world? The 9th of September 2001 will be remembered as the day the world changed. The turn of the century in the Western world was signaled by this national trauma, but also by a change in the humanist paradigm that very much conditioned the way in which such trauma was experienced and represented. This article explores this intrasection in the works of Thomas Pynchon and Art Spiegelman as they struggle to account for 9/11 through two trauma narratives that signal a matching change in aesthetic approach. Its methodological innovation lies in the application of Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" to the humanities.*

*Keywords:* Intra-action, critical posthumanism, trauma studies, 9/11, accountability, North American narrative.

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**TRAUMA POSTHUMANISTA: ENFOQUE INTRASECCIONAL DE LA  
DETERMINACIÓN RESPONSABLE  
EN LA NARRATIVA NORTEAMERICANA ACTUAL**

**RESUMEN.** *¿Cómo lidiar con el trauma en un mundo posthumano? El 11 de septiembre de 2001 se recordará como el día que cambió el mundo. El cambio de siglo en el mundo occidental quedó señalado por este traumanacional, así como por un cambio en el paradigma humanista que condicionó en gran medida el modo en que dicho trauma se experimentó y se representó. Este artículo explora cómo intraseccionan los trabajos de Thomas Pynchon y Art Spiegelman al intentar representar el 11S a través de dos narrativas de un trauma que marcan un cambio de enfoque estético. Su innovación metodológica reside en la aplicación del concepto de "intra-acción" de Karen Barad al campo de las humanidades.*

*Palabras clave:* intra-acción, posthumanismo crítico, estudios de trauma, responsabilidad, 11S, narrativa norteamericana.

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In 2015, Professor Francisco Collado Rodríguez called my attention to the growing relevance of posthumanism in the context of trauma studies. Although his main interest in this intersection involved the definition of the narrative self in twenty-first-century North American fiction, my personal findings in the field of agential materialism suggested that such intersection would be better explored if it included textual aspects beyond the narrative self, since both paradigms (trauma and posthumanist studies) explored the redefinition of the human self beyond limits of the merely human such as the instrumental mediation/extension of the self and the possibility of objective reality.

The present essay develops a critical elaboration that articulates this intersection through a sketch of its literary genealogy. I illustrate this elaboration with a comparative discussion of the narrative form that this intersection takes in Thomas R. Pynchon and Art Spiegelman's most recent novels: *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). It could be argued that both works are articulated around the common theme (object) of the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the common instrument of posthumanist approach, and the common concern for the subjects who experience trauma through a posthumanist prism. Yet I contend that their narrative practice in both cases illustrates the *intra-section* of these elements rather than their intersection, since they question the preexisting difference between them by blurring the categorical borders of trauma, artifice and subjectivity.

My critical frame attempts to explore the intrasectorial genealogy of these three participants through a selection of texts where such genealogy becomes

most evident, and that are widely considered as landmarks in the development of Western thought along the time vector that leads to the concerns of the present critical and historical moment. I begin with an outline of the main concerns of each of these elements as if they preexisted and had not always been entangled with each other so as to better reveal the nodules where they intra-sect. This should show their emergence in intra-active relation with each other. In order to be able to do that, I also briefly present the main difference between the interactive and intra-active models in the context of material realism (or agential materialism) as developed by Karen Barad in 2007.

To put it as simply as the idea would allow, Barad elaborates on the objectivity/complementarity debate that confronted theoretical physicists Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein since the fifth Solvay Conference (1927). The main point of contention lies in the preexistence (or not) of the basic, minimum elements taking part in an experiment; the *subject* who conducts the experiment, the *instrument* used for observation and the *object* that is observed. While Einstein contended that all of them preexist their encounter during the experiment, Bohr argued that the differences among them emerge from the experimental encounter that determines them and the relations among them. To Einstein, the issue was related to the possibility of knowing reality, not to the possibility of determining the existence of reality. To Bohr, the fact that experimental conditions alter the results of experiments meant that these conditions cannot in fact be determined until the results are obtained. Roughly put, this implies that despite conditions existed before the experiment, they were not the conditions determined by and determining the experiment. The subject, instrument and object of the experiment did not therefore interact during the experiment (which would imply that they pre-existed it) but intra-act during the agential cut that determines their difference as subject, instrument and object (they result from the experiment). Barad contends that Einstein's model is based on reflection, whereas Bohr's is based on diffraction (wave interference). Although it was a mainly theoretical argument in 1927, recent findings on experimental physics have proved that it was Bohr, and not Einstein, who was right.<sup>1</sup>

One of Barad's merits in this debate is developing a physical theory that Bohr (perhaps intentionally) left incomplete by trying to apply her own approach to the issue. This task proves to be particularly difficult in explaining the way that complementary phenomena are determined into difference. The complementary, intra-active, diffractive character of phenomena makes it necessary to think of matter determinacy as self-agential. When the idea is put in the simpler terms

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1 For a full discussion of this particular issue, see Barad (2007: 137-161).

of ecofeminist theory, pseudo-animist concepts such as agential matter, the spirit of matter or intelligent matter are used.<sup>2</sup> But what Barad implies is not the conscious intelligence of a preexisting matter. She rather suggests that the order in which matter becomes determinate in its difference is created by every intra-action and did not preexist such intra-action. As she struggles to advance Bohr's theoretical concept of *phenomenon* towards the idea of the agency of matter, she needs to reject Einstein's reflexive, imitative, reiterative, objectivist model. However, she paradoxically claims that phenomena are iterative. This assertion, which Barad merely mentions without furthering its possible implications, is an important impediment for the intra-active model, yet one that might possibly help to determine more clearly the most vaguely defined concept of the "agency" of matter.

Another of her merits is bringing up one the consequences of Bohr's model for the humanities: the non-distinction between matter and information. Although most of the debate around agential materialism is mainly and currently related to ecofeminism, the fact that matter and information stand in a complementary—not supplementary—relation is crucial for posthumanist studies as they develop some of the key issues that concerned poststructuralism in the second half of the twentieth century, but also as it intersects with the reconceptualization of the human being in a posthuman and transhuman context.

If, in the spirit of relativist objectivism, I approached my question as an intersectional scientific experiment, I would have to define the subject of such experiment as the Western subject; the instrument of analysis as critical posthumanism and the object of study as trauma narrative. But such is certainly not my spirit, since it would be stubborn to stick to a disproved scientific theory while having all the unexplored possibilities of the validated one at reach. During the intra-action that must be previous to the determination of experiment participants, the limits that qualify them as different are still not very clear (indeterminate) because their differences have not been agentially cut yet. So as these differences are intra-actively cut, the Western subject and posthumanist criticism sometimes appear like the object of study, while narrative, trauma studies and the concept of the Western self occasionally take the shape of instrumental accessories. Similarly, trauma narratives and posthumanist criticism seem to be mainly concerned with issues of subjectivity (its nature or de-construction and naturalization). But let us begin with our.

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<sup>2</sup> See Bennett (2010), and Braidotti (2013).

## 1. SUBJECT

The first human being in the Judeo-Christian tradition was created as a natural being, although it might be more precise to use the term “constructed” since it was shaped out of a piece of clay. By “natural” here I refer to the fact that he was like the rest of God-created, natural beings in all aspects but one; that unlike the rest of natural beings, Man was the sole name-giver. While this function of the natural man first appears as a continuation of God’s creative project and therefore justifies the otherwise unjustified assertion that of all created creatures, Man was the only one that was similar to God, the main difference between Man’s and God’s language is that unlike the later, the former is not intrinsic to (same as), but an artificial *supplement* to natural creation. At this point in creation (6<sup>th</sup> day), Man is the holder and giver of linguistic artifice, but he is not artificial himself; he is still a natural Man; un(self)conscious, unaccountable subject.

The first difference between the human subject and the natural Man (what separated him from the natural creation around him) was the sin of self-awareness, by which Adam and Eve, for the first time, see themselves from God’s perspective as lacking in an artifice that belongs in them or rather, *on* them; their clothes. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Man becomes human (defined as self-conscious subject, subject to the law, accountable for their sins) when Adam and Eve realize they are naked. Their humanity is then related to this embarrassment of having lost something that would restore their human wholeness, but that, paradoxically, they did not need to be whole in the first instance (before they were human subjects). I guess it might be safely argued that the birth of humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition is inexorably linked to the self-consciousness of a loss, or of self as *loss*.<sup>3</sup> The paradox lies in the fact that what human beings miss to complete the picture of their lost natural wholeness is not natural, but artificial. When human beings gain consciousness of themselves or self-consciousness, the artificial is already entangled in this self-consciousness. The Judeo-Christian human is already a *moral* subject,<sup>4</sup> an already prosthetic being, a sinner against natural(ized), divine law.

Along the development of Christianity and roughly until the advent of the scientific paradigm in Modernity, the discriminating subjectivity of Man was (a)

3 My use of this word must be understood within Dominick LaCapra’s study of historical trauma (2001: 50-53). While the natural man lacks humanity, the human subject experiences humanity as a loss of artifice. This implies that what makes Man human is not the gain in artifice, nor the lack in nature, but the willful amputation of the artificial from the natural that premises humanity as inherently prosthetic.

4 Morality, or the sense of sin, is intrinsically linked to humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where the *original* sin involves the self-amputation of the artificial from the natural. Humanity is thus rooted in a self-inflicted trauma (not on the natural Man, but on the human subject).

located in the immaterial transcendence of the human soul, a Platonically-inspired, natural given that was prosthetically supplemented by the immanent human body. While the material body was temporal and therefore not inherent to the transcendental self, the transcendental self was still accountable for this prosthetic body, where sin was conveniently located, and through which the transcendental soul could be purged from sin. Still, despite the apparently extrinsic nature of this human body, the resurrection of the dead includes the Jesus-led resurrection of the flesh too.<sup>5</sup>

In abandoning the spiritual paradigm as a source of social organization for the scientific one, modernity turned to La Mettrie's 1747 mechanistic vision of man. As La Mettrie applies the laws of Natural Philosophy to the (medical) study of the human being, the technological metaphor that sees the universe as a coherent and cohesive machine is also extended to the new conception of man in which the transcendental soul is displaced by the exclusively—and mechanically elusive—human faculty of reason. Although La Mettrie's machinical model seems to displace the human natural from the picture, it is in fact representing the whole of nature as mechanical (ruled by the laws—mechanics—of Natural Philosophy). What distinguishes the human from the natural automaton in this Enlightened context is not a moral or spiritual, but a rational quality that rises man above the merely mechanical to an ideal, universal, logical or mathematical Sublime.

Common to all visions of humanity so far, is the anthropocentric supremacy over living and non-living beings that is based on the prosthetic compensation of a transcendental absence lying at the very constituency of the human being as subject to moral, spiritual or rational imperatives. Common to all of them is also human self-consciousness as a moral, spiritual and rational prosthesis to the natural being that the human subject is superior to precisely because of the intrinsic disability that makes human beings prosthetic beings.

In its epics of independence from God, the Romantic subject emerges from the struggle to create himself free from divine intervention (and rule), which they do by the necessary paradox of drawing their own subjective liminality. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), Georg Hegel would claim that the human self emerges as self-conscious only in meeting with someone other than himself that can reciprocate the acknowledgement of the self's existence. This requirement

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5 The same pattern is repeated here, by which moral transcendence is dependent on the instrumentalization of artificial immanence. The transcendental self depends on the amputation of its bodily prosthesis, which becomes most obvious in the negative way of the mystics (e.g. St. John of the Cross) and develops into René Descartes's midway between Reason and Spirit (his *cogito ergo sum* is instrumental in this logical deduction of the soul).

of mutual recognition is not however, to Hegel, restricted to exclusively human otherness. In his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1835-38), Hegel confronts human self-consciousness not with a reciprocating human other, but with the concrete form that this thinking consciousness takes when drawn or projected out of the self so that the self can look at it. The self-consciousness that distinguishes the Hegelian subject from the *natural* Man that they were before becoming a subject is based on their liminality, which is instrumental in the cases of both human and non-human alterity, but a craft only in the case of non-human alterity. Moreover, also specific of non-human alterity is that it is a supplement to human self-consciousness that was initially drawn from the non-conscious or natural Man. This artifice can be understood as the *pharmakon* for the self-inflicted damage (trauma) of self-consciousness.<sup>6</sup> The Hegelian self-conscious subject is therefore a prosthetic being that adds artificial humanity to a damaged natural Man the same as sin adds freewill to the moral Man and the mechanical body adds Reason to the human Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to previous (Platonic) ideas of mimesis, what is specific of Hegel's Aesthetics is that he considers human-made artifacts to be superior to natural creations because unlike the latter, the former are intentional (did he mean moral, non-random?).<sup>8</sup> Yet, paradoxically, the artificiality of human aesthetic output has a higher quality the more dissimulated or naturalized its artifice is (the more seemingly purposeless?, the more seemingly random?, the more transparent?).<sup>9</sup> For the full consciousness of the Hegelian Spirit, the *dissimulated* prosthesis is a *conditio sine qua non*, which seems to imply that the transcendental human subject is pro- and ae-sthetic—a willful addition to a willful subtraction. The Hegelian aesthetic sublimation or Human Spirit is based on the artificial dissimulation of this artifice that, however, should cease to operate as the human self loses sight of the dissimulated subtraction/addition process.

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6 The connection between the posthuman prosthetic and trauma studies becomes most obvious in the context of Jacques Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy," where artificial writing is represented as a supplement of (lost) memory (1968; 1981). The process of human self-amputation of memory is most evident in Derrida's reading of Plato's writings.

7 It must be noticed that these differences only become definite after traumatic self-amputation, which, strictly speaking, means that trauma is the quality of moral, spiritual and rational humanity, not of the amoral, natural, unself-conscious Man.

8 This superiority is based on premising human supremacy, and understanding humanity as the self-conscious exercise of freewill in inflicting self-amputation.

9 Self-amputation (drawing artificial otherness out of the self) is a condition for the natural Spirit that allows the human being to exist self-consciously in Sublime spiritual connection with the whole of nature.

## 2. CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM

Critical posthumanism (Herbrechter 2013) is based on an aesthetic objectivist (Einsteinian) search of scientific truth that resists dissimulation (relativism, perspectivism) as it also intersects with the realization that the (humanist) declared independence from God and sin makes humans dependent on artifice (instrument, point of view) in return. Within this frame, humanist dystopias emerged along the 20<sup>th</sup> century that challenge the humanist utopia (based on dissimulation) by portraying human subjectivity as subject to linguistic (representative, in general) technologies such as the Lacanian development of psychoanalysis, Marxist superstructures, and diverse—phenomenological, formalist, genealogical, structuralist and deconstructivist—claustrophobias (Derrida’s “iln’y a pas d’hors text(e)”)—that minimize human freewill and agency, and force man to imagine humanity as 1) prefabricated construct (Benjamin) or 2) the simulation of an imagined humanity (Baudrillard).

In both cases I diagnose a supremacist *angst* by which the human being seeks to expand themselves by exercising more force on the (preexisting or drawn from themselves) external physical environment than the force that such environment exercises on them. Yet the harder they push, the stronger the resistance they find (Hegelian humanist version of Newton’s Third Law of Motion; the more the human draws from themselves, the more they need to add). The hybrid model (conceptualized by Haraway through the metaphor of the cyborg) that proposes a midway (Anglo-Saxon *middle-earth*, the location of humanity) between nature and artifice, or self and other, is still based on their essential difference and does not resolve the humanist paradox. The critical posthumanist approach proposes paradox as a practical critical model: it takes the cyborg hybrid as a naturalized reality (by means of suspension of disbelief) for practical reasons, while pointing at its artificial character (disbelief) for critical reasons.

This model is familiar to all fictional representation (essentially Cervantine), and makes *critical* self-consciousness the defining quality of the posthuman subject. In terms of Quantum Physics, it describes the wave behavior of light as uncertainly particular (resolves the wave-particle paradox through uncertainty, and is therefore objectivist and relativist). It is also a reflection of the parliamentary political model by which citizens accept the law they make as natural (just) while they also accept that it can be both *enforced and questioned*. This model for justice (or moral order) is also utilitarian in that it enforces the numerical superiority that dissimulates the democratic underlying metonymy by disregarding difference and minimizing the individual subject (while this individual subject still remains the basis of democracy). The resulting minimization dissimulates the qualitative impact of the individual by the rhetorical figure that guarantees their quantitative



participation in democracy. Aesthetically considered, the democratic model dissimulates its rhetorical artifice to justify itself by the apparent naturalization of a quantitative metonymy. The result is the aesthetic devaluation of quality in favor of a quantitative leveling or uniformization of differential individuality.

The Romantic Subject or genius, the Napoleonic, Nietzschean hero or his evolution or involution towards the totalitarian leader in twentieth-century populist regimes—both at the left and right of an imagined center—is also erased from the aesthetic and political ideal (resulting in the current model of the political leader as an everyday (wo)man; a quantitatively representative rather than qualitative, leading political figure). Against this necessary prosthetic naturalization, critical posthumanism proposes critical self-detachment (disbelief) as the last paradoxically artificial den of the human, individual subject in the hope that double negation cancels the double deviation into a positiv(ist) result. Critical posthumanism demands a self-conscious use of rhetoric that acknowledges the rhetorical quality of rhetorical artifice. The critical posthumanist subject acknowledges their (moral and amoral) *responsibility* in *necessarily* inflicting damage on their traumatized self.

### 3. TRAUMA

*a storm is blowing in from Paradise*

W. Benjamin, 1940

Trauma narratives (notice the nature/artifice oxymoron in the phrase) are articulated around a similar paradox that confronts the subject with the naturalized artifices of human identity and memory. The difference in this case lies in the fact that trauma studies make a case of time and space as variables in a more visible (less dissimulated) way than the synchronic/ubiquitous approaches of Christianity (eternalist) and Modernity (universalist). The difficulty of narrating human identity along temporal difference is also based on Hegelian aesthetics in the sense that the present subjective identity is defined against the remembered past and imagined future that the human subject draws from themselves. The dissimulation of this artifice suspends the disbelief in the naturalization of the present self, but also renders this self as lacking, since the dissimulated past and future haunt them as remembered ghosts or promises respectively (either utopian or dystopian). The dissimulation of both artifices has been theorized by LaCapra as forms of discursive (historicist, ultimately narrative) acting-out trauma that include dislocation and compulsive iteration of past damage in the here-now and the promise of redemption in the future. In both cases, the present self is necessarily rendered as traumatized or lacking an original (remembered) or

resulting (projected)<sup>10</sup> subjective identity the naturalization of which is artificially dissimulated.

Trauma studies appear in this post-humanist context as an expression of the social dystopia that represents a technologically oppressed human self, matching naturalized utopias. These naturalized utopias represent the past or future humanist freedom of the Hegelian, Romantic Spirit that Theodor W. Adorno would theorize as the promise of art or the artistic *promise*. The very word “trauma” is a biological metaphor that metonymically extends to the subjective sphere through the discursive path of psychoanalysis, to the social sphere through the discursive path of Marxism, or to the scientific-technological sphere through the mechanist path of Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s machinical model for the soulless Man. Deprived of Soul, the humanity of the mechanical (merely biological) human self is found in the mind, which is taken to be the physical and relational (social) location of reason.<sup>11</sup> The mechanist metaphor allows bridging a gap between the physical damage inflicted on the body and the psychological damage inflicted on the mind—where the Freudian self still resides.

This model replaces the moral imperative of sin given by God (identifying the natural and legal, physical and discursive) through the medical metaphor of health. While the physical model premises that traumas (loss of health) exist and can seek the restoration of health in relation with the (discursive, socially constructed and then naturalized by iteration of the rational and universal proportion of the aural number) Vitruvian model of human perfection (masculinity, ability, youth, and functionality among other vectors), mental health is based on the construction of a naturalized simulacrum that is displaced from the present traumatized (subtracted) self by locating it at some arbitrary and vaguely defined moment in the past and/or future. The past self is thus constructed from the present as an idealized whole of the human self (that Hegel would, however, still deprive of consciousness, just like Freud did with the id) that haunts (like the perfect model of old King Hamlet the Father) the present, traumatized, liminal self (marked by the loss that this self-simulacrum causes in them).<sup>12</sup>

The possibility of the project to restore mental health (and by extension, social health) after physical (and historical) trauma finds two paths for completion.

10 In both cases, imagined, artificial, metonymical.

11 Unsurprisingly, the humanist rational model can also be traced back to its ancient Greek roots through the metaphor of the human body as the personification (naturalization) of aristocratic social organization (mind-heart-guts).

12 e.g. Prince Hamlet as a modern self is already a cyborg, a psychologically dystopian (mad) monster that cannot naturalize himself back to completion (mental health) because he needs the artificial ghost of his father to (be)come Prince (not king) Hamlet.

One is the naturalization of the artifact, which does not resolve trauma, but rather heightens it. LaCapra typifies this path as narrative of redemption or destruction.<sup>13</sup> The other one is incorporation/restoration of trauma to the self as part of the self, a critical self, a cyborg hybrid that does not restore health, but performs a healing function through a discursive prosthesis that acknowledges its artificial character. This discursive prosthesis also incorporates (back) that internal difference to the re-constitution of the Hegelian Spirit, which makes a new prosth-et(h)ical and pro(ae)sthetic Sublime and serves as critical model for critical posthumanism. While this cyborg gains organic function, it still remains cybernetically self-conscious. It is not naturalized (dissimulated), but artificially discursive, and *intra-acts* rather than *inter-acts* in the construction of a self that can only look back at difference (become determinate) in retrospect (like Benjamin's 1940 interpretation of Klee's *Angelus Novus* in his 9<sup>th</sup> thesis on the philosophy of history).

Yet for critical posthumanism, the ethical or moral issue is ultimately unresolved, since the prosthetic proportion remains similarly undetermined (not undecidable or unknowable), except retrospectively. The moral issue or idea of sin is still rooted in the Christian (Jewish) frame of freewill—which posthumanist ecology has recently reformulated as “agency”—and a causalist, scientific frame that is the ultimate limit through which the (post)human self seeks self-consciousness: the future or horizon of events. Once more, the prosthetic discursive technology of the past, and present demanding pressure of a linear conception of time (that is traced in causal, social Darwinist, and liberal evolutionism as a continuation of biblical eternalist predestination) technologically pushes (looks back at) the postMan from the Unknown, Sublime future.

Democratizing or relativizing ethics does not solve the question of quality (proportion) because even psychoanalytic desirability (*id*) is based on a dissimulated, naturalized construct that the posthuman Spirit cannot suspend in disbelief anymore. Humanist solutions involve utopian/dystopian dissimulation, while the critical posthumanist option should incorporate (all?) the still undetermined possibilities that are faced by the Modern tragic hero at the intra-active (present) moment of indecision between amoral freewill and the tragic notion of destiny.

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13 Shakespeare would tragically choose the last one as the only possible way to achieve the former, anticipating Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche. Thus, Prince Hamlet must also die and become Horatio's ghost, while president George Bush Jr. would seek to restore national health after 9/11 through the war against international terrorism; promising to heal the World Trade Center trauma with poisonous *pharmaka*.

#### 4. INTRA-ACTION AND ITERATION

Going back now to Barad's agential realist model and its problem with iteration, while the constructed nature of historical discourse is not particularly brought into LaCapra's discussion between acting-out (repetition) and working-through trauma, the incorporation of critical distance and empathic unsettlement to processes of working-through are elements that also incorporate time to the trauma narrative equation. The critical distance allowed by the passing of time does not only evidence a change in perspective in relation with past events, but also a suspicion about the supposed reliability of remembered memories as much as of the supposedly detached critical distance of the here-now. Since both are suspicious of incorporating artifice to the naturalized narrative of traumatic experience, the critical distance that detaches the traumatized self from their past experience allows them to look at that their past self as (an)Other narrated self that exists in the same plane as perpetrators, thus causing in them empathic unsettlement in the process of positioning the subject's present point of view in relation with their past Other. The narrated past self is split from the narrative voice by virtue of the narrative artifice of which the past self is already an indeterminate part; a narrative artifice that the present narrative voice draws out of *itself* to determine its (post)human identity as *it* works through trauma in the here-now.

The naturalization of the rhetorical artifice that acts out past/distant traumas as if they were occurring in the here/now ultimately targets the aesthetic Sublime that incorporates the physical other to the narrated self. This aesthetic Sublime has been theorized as a psychological effect of trauma (Caruh 1996) or in Marxist terms, as the social-material, super- and infrastructural conditions that silence the individual and collectives selves (Pederson 2014; Gibbs 2014; Whitehead 2004), and as a form of the Unutterable Sublime. In contrast with this, the narrative self that works through trauma is returned their humanity by virtue of a critical distance and empathic unsettlement that incorporates both iteration and agency in a complementary relation to the narrative phenomena. This narrative self will retain their humanity as long as they resist the temptation to naturalize it and acknowledge in the artifice that determines their humanity, a reciprocity (in terms of intra-active complementarity) that was previously (interactively) granted to other humans only.

#### 5. *BLEEDING EDGE* AND *IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS*. INSTANTIATIONS OF CRITICAL POSTHUMANIST NARRATIVE TRAUMA

*Bleeding Edge* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* are two literary products that share a common critical posthumanist view of the narrative self that emerges from

the narrative of the particular traumatic events of 9/11. It could be argued that 1) while the 9/11 trauma is the main thematic component (object of imitation) of both novels, both also articulate the narration of the subjectivities that experience such events, and that 2) both do that through the instrumental use of critical posthumanism (Herbrechter 2013). In both cases, theme and voice (narrative object and subject) are also complementary in their diffractive (iterative and agential, fractal) narrative determination, which includes narrative artifice as the instrumental medium in their diffractive phenomena. Their determination, however, can only be sensed in retrospect, since the novels offer an internal privileged view of diffraction before determination that is based on the temporary suspension of objectivist disbelief.

In the postmodernist tradition, intertextual, metafictional references typically point to the artificial, constructed quality of narrative that activates disbelief and disconnects the artificial from the human and the textual from the extratextual, causing an effect of relativist paranoid uncertainty. However, in these novels, intertextuality and metafiction are presented in diffractive, complementary, intra-active relation with the present (involving author, text and reader in their textual and extratextual intra-active contexts) narrated textuality, and the thematic object and subjective voice. The incorporation of intertextual metafiction in these novels does not only create a critical distance that denaturalizes the traumatic Sublime by pointing to its artificial quality. It also establishes an intra-active relation with the present trauma narrative in agential-iterative, complementary terms that are entangled with the extra-textual as well, conferring the critical posthumanist narrative an ethical role that makes *it* accountable.

In order to illustrate how this intra-action occurs, I bring into view the use that both Pynchon and Spiegelman make of intertextual metafiction in these novels. *Bleeding Edge* narrates the endeavors of the fictional character of the freelance fraud investigator Maxine Turnow six months before and after the attacks. The particularities that configure the character of Maxine, however, are carefully selected so that she has implausibly coincidental (overtly artificial) and privileged access to a diversity of perspectives on the 9/11 attacks, which qualifies her as an *everyman* (particular<sup>14</sup> but objective, in relative terms that initially seem to point to the paranoid uncertainty typically troubling the mind of Pynchonian characters). Also in a typically Pynchonian fashion, the novel's resistance to closure seems to have the double effect of suggesting that although it would not be possible for this everyman to resolve the uncertainty resulting from the relative perspectivism converging in her (Wallhead and Leissmer 2018), there is a conspiracy of some

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<sup>14</sup> I have analyzed the effects that the particularities of gender difference in the case of Maxine have in narrating national trauma (Fernández-Santiago 2019).

sort behind the attacks. In fact, it is suggested that it is precisely because she has access (though limited) to so many possible perspectives that it is impossible to choose just one of them.

With this approach, which Barad would qualify as typically Einsteinian objectivist, the novel stands as a narrative instrument that interferes with the *mimetic* representation of 9/11 through the use of perspectivism. Although the narrative voice is that of an omniscient narrator, the perspective of the events narrated is *mainly* that of the phenomenological conditions used to portray Maxine as a character.<sup>15</sup> Rather than reflecting the events as they happened, the character of Maxine is evidenced as a narrative artifact that deflects such events, so that readers are forced to calculate the deviation of an imagined original narrative vector, and actively engage in (identify with) the mental processes through which the main character constructs the narrative. Yet I would like to emphasize that this perspective is *not the only one* rendered in the novel, which will make a significant difference. But I come back to this below.

*In The Shadow of No Towers* also represents the 9/11 attacks from the perspective of its main character, although, in this case, the narrative voice is an autobiographical projection of Spiegelman himself, who reconstructs his personal experiences of the attacks as he directly and indirectly experienced them through mass media. Although Spiegelman's construction of narrative voice in this case is autobiographical, the overtly caricaturesque features that he uses to depict himself in his novel (occasionally as a mouse in intertextual reference to *Maus*), together with the pressing relevance that he gives to the role of mass media in the overtly artificial *live* broadcasting of the falling towers and later contribution to constructing nationalist narratives of destruction and redemption, make a case of not dissimulating the rhetorical artifice deflecting the vector of an ultimately unutterable, traumatic Sublime. Like in *Bleeding Edge*, Spiegelman problematizes the interference that his own narrative voice causes in representing an event, the actuality of which—though untraceable to its totally mimetic, transparent account—is not questioned.

Going back to the italicization of the adverb “mainly” mentioned above, although more subtle in Pynchon, the exception to the Einsteinian, objectivist solution to the relativist uncertainty caused by narrative artificial interference with mimesis makes half of Spiegelman's novel, and extends to the design of the front and back covers of his work. Spiegelman's use of intertextual material is obvious from the first page, where he collages 1901 actual news from *The World* reporting a conspiracy to murder President William McKinley with his drawing of one of the

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15 The use of perspective as the distinguishing difference between mimesis and narration has been theorized by Schmid (2010: 6-7).

Twin Towers in flames, while in the last page, the news from the early twentieth century fade in the background to make room for early twenty-first century, 9/11 related headlines. This frame is suggestive not only of history repeating itself, but also of mass media's dissimulated, artificial (naturalized), sensationalist rendering of the events. That the intention behind this overtly intertextual composition is to make mass-media sensationalism partly accountable for historical repetition is made clear by Spiegelman himself when he relates Pulitzer-Hearst's "distorted reporting of the Spanish-American War--America's first colonialist adventure" to their newspaper "fierce circulation war" (Spiegelman 2004: 11).

The thematization of the impact of mediation in narration is a crucial metafictional feature of Spiegelman's art that can be traced back to *Maus* (Spiegelman 2003). In his narration of surrogated trauma, as well as his first-person witnessing of 9/11, the narrative (and pictorial) construction of the community and personal post-traumatic self is overtly artificialized by the cumulative interference of diverse media and discourses (economic, political, historical, psychological, social, graphic, journalistic, fictional) with the ultimately unutterable (objective) mimesis of the traumatic Sublime. This perspectivist approach to narration is necessarily paradoxical in that it renders an image of the human that is doubly traumatized by the loss caused by the extratextual, historical trauma and the instrumental amputation of the artificial form that mediates and makes narration possible.

That Spiegelman calls attention to the double artificiality in the narration of, and through, the self is specially obvious when he dedicates ten pages of the total twenty-three that make the novel, to a "Comic Supplement," where he reproduces the actual plates of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century comic supplements published in diverse New York papers at the time (the Katzenjammer Kids, The Kinder Kids, Hogan's Alley and its Yellow Kid, the Happy Hooligan, the Kinder Kids, Upside Downs, Little Nemo, Bringing Up Father, and Krazy Kat) together with a two-page introduction to contextualize their history and relevance. What is so interesting in this supplement is not only that by juxtaposing his own graphic art to the New York comic classics, he is calling attention to the fact that his own work is part of this comic tradition. This also comprises a double-edged (also paradoxical) interpretation that points at the paradoxical relation between the artificiality of caricature and its allegorical, universal character.

Still more interesting though, is the fact that his selection of plates has the uncanny effect of advancing the diverse thematic elements of his narrative of 9/11 (terrorism and nationalism, the nightmarish falling of towers, the threat of the Muslim world, the war scare, the upside-down verticality of the crumbling towers, the shared traumatic experience of victims and perpetrators, and the city

of New York): “I tell you, some of those century-old crumbling newspaper pages seem like they were drawn yesterday!” (2004: 11), he comments. The pervading presence of these comic supplements is also interspersed in Spiegelman’s own drawings and text (falling shoes, Spiegelman as Happy Hooligan or having dreams like Little Nemo, Bringing Up Father watching the 9/11 attacks live on TV, the upside-down Bush-led crowd, the Tower Twins, and amongst them, also mice).

The use that Spiegelman gives to this overtly metafictional intertextual pervasiveness suggests an intention beyond the mere problematization of the constructiveness of memory and the paranoid effects of its resulting uncertainty, which also seem to go beyond the fatalistic stance that renders history as cyclical. Moreover, the pervasiveness of these intertextual references suggests an active role in the construction of Spiegelman’s narrative, which is not only relativized by constructing it against them, but *through* them, and which also narrates them as it adds a retrospective, fractal dimension to their original construction. Rather than interacting with each other with the ironic detachment that separates them in the typical postmodern tradition, they intra-act with each other in their entangled narrative determination. Rather than rendering the individual (artist) a helpless victim of the unavoidable historical and discursive causes that he narrates himself in, or the naturalized almighty architect (name-giver) of an artificial work, the intra-active relation suggested by Spiegelman’s graphic novel makes *him*<sup>16</sup> accountable for his agential contribution to phenomenal definition, but in intra-active entanglement with equally agential textual and extratextual participants. He is no more a natural Man defined against the Machine-man or cyborg-monster either in the utopian or dystopian traditions, but a continuum of diffractive agencies interacting in a phenomenon where self, others and instruments are determined. And each of the agencies entangled in this phenomenon is accountable for future as well as past determinacies.

*In the Shadow of No Towers* does not only point to the artificial quality of memory and of the traumatized, transhuman, self-defining and defined within narratives of victimization and/or redemption. In doing so, it also points to the agential accountability of all the participants involved in their diffractive determination. The sense of awe at the unutterable, traumatic Sublime is replaced here by the conscious awareness of the participants’ complementary contributions to their *actual* definitions. Intra-active definition makes it difficult to distinguish between victims and perpetrators and establishes a relational distance between the here and there, as well as past and present that is not mechanically trapped

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16 There seems to be no difference between the naturalized author, the author function and the narrative voice in the novel.



in acting-out, but agentially open to/entangled with temporal, geographical and subjective otherness.

The interspersion of the Comic Supplements throughout the novel cannot be interpreted solely as 9/11 historically and narratively acting out past, unresolved traumas, but as a critical reflection on the intra-active accountability that previous redemptive/apocalyptic determinations have on 9/11, and of the reciprocally accountable determinations that present narratives make of past traumas. To Spiegelman, the obvious, caricaturesque artificiality of the early twentieth-century comic supplements renders a more realistic (mimetic) account of 9/11 than the live broadcasting of the falling towers or his obsessive revisitation of the attacks, because they allow to establish a critical distance from them (the comic supplements become comic complements). If this critical distance cannot possibly render an objective narration of traumatic events beyond relativistic uncertainty, it can certainly account for their intra-active determinacy. In this sense, it can be argued that *In The Shadow of No Towers* renders a fictional narrative of what LaCapra defines as working-through traumatic experience. The traumatic, unutterable Sublime is here replaced by the moment of indefinition where human agency is rendered accountable. There is a most Shakespearian, tragic sense in this that connects twenty-first century critical posthumanism to early-modern humanism and against classical tragedy and its uncritical, causal obsession with natural destiny.

In Pynchon's novel, the revision of postmodernist metafictional intertextuality is more subtle, though not less effective. The artificially perspectivist narrative arrangement of the novel through which implausibly privileged and multiple points of view converge in the character of Maxine is constructed through intertextual references with the diverse conspiracy theories sensationally proposed by mass media after the attacks along the years. Its effect is typically deconstructivist, pointing at the uncertainty that non-closure causes through meaning deferral and to the ultimate impossibility to mimetically represent the traumatic event of 9/11. Through this prism, the unutterability of this traumatic Sublime is represented by the frustrated compulsion to explain the traumatic moment and its circumstances through inconclusive, uncertain, different perspectives. The traumatic Sublime remains ultimately unutterable because the artificiality of its narrative interferes with, deflects or blocks the view. This perspectivist objectivism pervades most of the narrative in the novel.

Yet the narrative voice in *Bleeding Edge* exceeds the points of view that converge in its main character. This narrative excess is conveyed through subtle though obvious intertextual references to two post WWI and WWII trauma literary masterpieces: T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922), and Spiegelman's *Mouse*.

Obvious references to Eliot's poem include action beginning and ending in "the cruelest month," or the comparison of lighted panels in a passing train to Tarot cards that, like the ones in Eliot's poem, only make sense within the context of the novel.<sup>17</sup> They also include the walking crowds of undone ghosts in chapter 28, with similar "crowds drifting slowly out<sup>18</sup> into the little legendary streets" (312); chapter 29, with the crowds of "zombies" who are "still walking around stunned" (321) as they take their children to school after the attacks; chapter 31, when Maxine's guru acknowledges he is "seeing people in the street who are supposed to be dead" and rhetorically wondering whether we are "seeing some wholesale return of the dead?" (339); and chapter 39, where "the legion of traumatized souls coming across the bridge, dust-covered, smelling like demolition and smoke and death, vacant-eyed, in flight, in shock" (445). All of these unmistakably evoke lines 62-65 from "The Burial of the Dead:" "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/I had not thought death had undone so many./Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,/And each man fixed his eyes before his feet." (35)

Maxine's encounter with Vip Epperdew in *DeepArcher* after the attacks makes her ask him "do you remember me?" since "[s]he is not sure he recognizes her" (405), which reproduces the encounter with the poet in "The Burial of the Dead" with his fellow-soldier Stetson, who, like Vip, also fails to answer his rhetorical question. While Eliot's poetic voice imagines "the Dog [. . .] digg[ing] up [. . .] again" [...] "[t]hat corpse you planted last year in your garden" (35), in chapter 37 of the novel, both dog and Stetson merge in Windust's apartment when Maxine addressed the alpha dog that is feeding at Windust's corpse: "Don't I remember you from Westminster last year, Best in Category?" (409). Finally, the falling towers that Eliot uses to symbolize the fall of civilization as a result of human *hybris* in "What the Thunder Said": "Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie" (51), haunt Pynchon's narrative with the same uncanny quality that the Comic Supplements haunt Spiegelman's graphic novel.

References to Spiegelman's *Maus* in the novel are also as subtle as unmistakable. In Chapter 24, Maxine's orgasm as she has sex with war-criminal and Lester's possible executioner, Windust, takes place with her simultaneous vision of "the wronged soul" of the former in the suggestive shape of a mouse. Then, during the first night right after the attacks,

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17 "The Scholar" pointing at revelation, "The Unhoused" suggesting the souls of the departed ones, "The Warrior Thief" in clear reference to Windust, "The Haunted Woman" (439) as Maxine herself, and finally "The Unwelcome Messenger" (440) from hell, who is Windust's ex-wife Xiomara.

18 Out of the Italian palazzo where the end-of-the millenium thematic gathering proleptically anticipates the fall of the Twin Towers.

Maxine dreams she's a mouse who's been running at large inside the walls of a vast apartment building she understands is the U.S. [. . .] she has been attracted by what she recognizes as a sort of human *mousetrap*<sup>19</sup> [. . .] a multilevel event space of some kind, at a gathering, maybe a party, full of unfamiliar faces, fellow mice, *but no longer exactly, or only, mice*<sup>20</sup> [. . .] and this can only be analogous to death. (Spiegelman 2014: 318-319)

Unlike *In The Shadows of No Towers*, *Maus* is mainly concerned with the artificial mediation of narrative in the representation of memory, be it public or personal. The obviously artificial representation of victims as mice and perpetrators as cats, denaturalizes the essentialist premises of racism that justify the holocaust. But it is through the unreliability of his father's report of the events and of the official accounts of the holocaust as they are confronted to each other, and to the change of medium in representation from supposedly unmediated tape recording to the obviously mediated comic format, that his concern for representing traumatic individual and collective memory is evidenced. In the above passage from *Bleeding Edge*, the Jewish victimist paranoia that haunts Spiegelman's *Mouse* is complemented in Maxine's dream with the critical reflection that it was not only victims (mice) who were trapped in the holocaust trauma, but also perpetrators (cats). Since Spiegelman's allegory is intertextually inserted in the novel to extend to 9/11, Pynchon seems to be implying that some of the victims of the 2001 terrorist attacks were also perpetrators and the other way round. Similarly, the simultaneity of Maxine's orgasm with the vision of Lester's corpse in the shape of a mouse establishes a possible causal relation between them, or at least makes her participant in his execution.

Despite the long critical tradition in trauma studies that links traumatic memories to the repressed unconscious, I would hesitate to explain these passages through Maxine's psychological processes. Instead, I would appeal to a long literary allegorical tradition that uses the motif of dreams or vision to either avoid censorship or enlarge the Real term (intensify the effect) of the allegorical comparison. The first purpose (avoiding censorship) connects with Joshua Pederson's social explanation of textual blanks (vs. Caruh's psychological one), and in the case of *Bleeding Edge*, points to the repressed accountability of the United States in mass media accounts of the attacks. In Pynchon's novel, the second purpose entangles WWII and 9/11 in a discursive (historical and literary) continuum that allows the US to gain perspective on its own responsibility in the international policies that ultimately led to the attacks.

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19 Title of chapter 6 in Spiegelman's novel.

20 My italics.

In both cases, the obvious artificiality of the allegorical visions that Maxine draws from herself allows her to determine the distinctiveness of her humanity in the particular and ongoing traumas of postcolonial politics, while it also permits her to see that such humanity is entangled with, and partly accountable for, the traumas through which herself and others are intra-actively determined as victims and perpetrators.

To the critical eye trained in Pynchon's narrative strategies, the shift from relativist, objectivist uncertainty to intra-active complementarity cannot be missed. While in his previous works metafictional intertextuality served to portray characters paranoically trapped (victimized) in the artificial discourses that often instrumentalize them as functions of their narrative structures, in *Bleeding Edge* Maxine is made accountable for her intra-action with such narratives. Although she lacks the objective perspective that would give her the total, Sublime account of unretrievable truths or memories, the uncertainty resulting from the artificially composite (cyborgian), paradoxical perspectivism that haunts her as much as Pynchon's previous characters is now determined by her particular accountability in the intra-active narration of her traumatic self. In Maxine, as well as in Spiegelman's narrative self in *In the Shadow of No Towers*, the Hegelian transhuman Spirit whose transcendental humanity is suspended in disbelief is replaced by the critical distance rendered by accounting for the self's agency in artificially drawing the other from the human self. One cannot miss the shadow of sin in the imperative of agential accountability, although in the case of critical posthumanism, the law that makes the human subject a sinner remains as indeterminate as the human subject themselves until the moment they become accountable.

In both novels, the effect of intertextual references goes beyond the merely metafictional into intra-active accountability, where some previous texts intra-act with the novel and the other way round, giving an entangled view of history and literature where the poet—and not only the characters—is agentially accountable, partly responsible and victim. They cease non-closure uncertainty through intra-active, accountable determination to prevent acting out paranoid perspectivism. The Hegelian ironic detachment that dissimulates accountability for drawing artificial otherness out of the self by rhetoricizing paradox, becomes literalized by the critical posthumanist model that dissolves the humanist (traumatic, self-mutilating) metonymy and returns artifice to the agential nature of the self.

## 6. FURTHER REFLECTIONS

The relation between trauma and the narrative construction of the traumatized self involves reconsidering the nature of memory as mediating and mediated

interface between the past traumatic event(s) and the present traumatized subject. The mediation of voice has been theorized as one of the distinguishing features of narrative against the mimetic and expressive qualities of drama and lyrical poetry by narratological criticism. Although mediation is intrinsic to any kind of representation, its discursive dissimulation is a matter of degree. Roman Jakobson (1960) defined the poetic function that typifies literary works as a device that calls attention to this dissimulation, while Hegel conditioned poetic quality to the dissimulation of its heightened artificiality. According to the latter's standards, narrative would be placed at the bottom of the poetic scale. The poetic devices that naturalize artifice target the Spiritual Sublime by which human beings define themselves against artificial otherness. Yet poetic value does not lie in eradicating artificiality from poetry, but in its dissimulation. According to this equation, the more obvious the artifice, the more valuable its dissimulation is and the more Spiritual humanity is.

In parallel development with postmodernist literary devices that evidence poetic artificiality, the development of trauma narrative problematizes the artificiality of narrative voice while attempting to naturalize it by establishing a metaphor that compares the body and the mind (i.e. the amputation of a member is compared to the amputation of a memory). The same humanist (Vitruvian) model that naturalizes the proportionality of the human body as *healthy* and serves to exclude other models of humanity from the humanist ideal, and that also extends to the social model that oppresses forms of humanity that deviate from such model (the colored, the disabled, the uncivilized, women) enforce trauma on this difference by naturalizing health. When the naturalized proportionality of the Vitruvian body is extended to the human mind, forgetfulness (a most healthy defense mechanism of the mind) becomes a symptom and a cause of psychological trauma. By heightening the difficulty in dissimulating artifice in trauma narrative, these narratives target an aesthetic sublime that LaCapra qualifies as redemptionist or apocalyptic and a correspondingly enlarged image of humanity.

Critical posthumanism is challenging this paradigm by denaturalizing the artificial in the construction of the human and incorporating it to a reconceptualization of the human that can be called posthuman only to the extent that it overcomes naturalization. By reconceptualizing the supplementary quality of artifice in the humanist paradigm as complementary, the binary liminality of a humanist definition of Man that is based on self-amputation is replaced by entangled determination of Man that is based on intra-action. This also replaces self-consciousness as the de-fining quality that makes human beings different from non-human otherness, with the agential accountability that determines human beings as entangled with non-human agencies.

The literary text is one of these non-human agencies that the human being is entangled with. It demands human agential accountability and (most intriguingly) should be found intra-actively accountable in return. The complementary nature of intra-action places accountability at the moment of indeterminacy and does not resolve the problem of iteration (aesthetic model) except in retrospective comparison, which is the moment of judgment. As I find it, indeterminacy is the posthumanist Sublime, the present horizon of events that is limitless in indeterminacy but intra-actively entangled and accountable.

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