Ghouls, Witches, and Hauntings and Traumata in "His House" (Weekes, 2020)
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31ST August 2022

Greetings Vice-Principle, Professor Motsa-Modikane; Executive Dean, Professor Masemola; my respondent, Dr Kirby-Hirst; Colleagues; Friends and Family. There are so many people to thank for opportunities that have been bestowed upon me. I especially want to thank my beloved husband Mark. I would also like to thank my parents, my family and my friends for their support and encouragement. There have been several individuals who have been instrumental in my being here tonight: Professor Danie du Plessis, my previous CoD, who gave me many opportunities, way above my paygrade. And my doctoral supervisors, Professor milton and Professor Reid for their insights into my study and their continued support and inspiration. Lastly, I want to thank Unisa for funding for my Phd; and also for all the conferences and training I was able to partake in due to their funding. I am extremely grateful to all those who in some way contributed to my being here tonight. However, tonight is dedicated to my students: past; present and future; who challenge me; humble me; and always inspire me.

When I went to university, some decades ago, I fell in love. With philosophy. Kant. Hume. Wittgenstein. I loved them all. I was enamored. I went from the Durban campus, to the Pietermaritzburg campus to further study Nietzsche; de Beauvoir; and Sarte. While there my mentor Fidéla Fouche introduced me to the Black Sash, which I joined immediately; and then, along with other members of the Black Sash co-founded the Imbali Support Group. Where we acted as human shields, peacemakers; and police minders in Imbali and its immediate surrounds, near Pietermaritzburg. But

during those traumatic years I suddenly found myself at a critical existential and ideological crossroads. I could not reconcile the atrocities of the civil war and apartheid with my theories. I realised theory had to mean something to me and my lived experiences. It had to have context. Confiding in a friend, Prithiney Naidoo, she recommended I speak to the Chair of the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, Professor Keyan Tomaselli. He persuaded me to give Cultural Studies a chance. I was then introduced to Professor Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, who is also foundational to my being here tonight.

Cultural studies led me to philosophers like Bhabhi; hooks, Said, Freire and Gramsci; Marx; Althusser; Deleuze and Spivak, amongst others. And most importantly to social semiotics: where I learnt that context is key and that cultural texts, such as museums, films, television programmes also mean something. I had a “new” set of theorists and theory that incorporated meaning in their texts that correlated with my own lived reality and instilled humanity into theory. This led me to memory and trauma studies, a relatively “young” field in the Humanities. And I used memory and trauma studies to provide new readings on the work of animation artist William Kentridge, who depicted the atrocities of apartheid as I too had born witness to. It is again tonight that I turn to cultural texts and memory and trauma studies in the reading of a film made by Netflix, called *His House* written by Remi Weekes and distributed in 2020, in which I use an hermeneutic and interpretivist approach to analyse the film.

His House, (2020), is a Netflix horror film. It stars the brilliant Wunmi Mosaku as “Rial”, Sope Dirisu as Rial’s husband “Bol”, and Malaika Abigaba as their daughter “Nyagak”; and Matt Smith as “Mark from the agency that helps settle refugees or asylum seekers. The film deals with the story of a couple, Bol and rial, a refugee couple fleeing from South Sudan (which is officially known as the Republic of South Sudan) with their

daughter, Nyagak. They braved stormy weathers when crossing the ocean in an unstable boat and many of those fleeing with them do not make it, including their young daughter who drowns when the bow of the ship breaks. After three months in a detention centre they are given a house to live in, on the outskirts of town. The house is filthy, it stinks and has hundreds of bugs and rotting food; the electrics do not work properly and the paint and the wallpaper are peeling. The walls look damp and wet. They are also allocated a small stipend. From the very outset the husband, Bol appears upbeat and tries to assimilate into English culture by visiting an English pub and singing English soccer songs; buying polo neck jerseys to wear; and encouraging his wife Rial to eat with a knife and fork and sit at a table at dinner time (instead of on the floor). Rial languishes in bed, and we assume it is from depression, and the loss of her daughter. She carries around her daughter's white little doll and even takes the beads off the doll to wear round her neck, obviously in remembrance of her daughter. When Rial finally ventures out, she experiences racism and taunting from the neighbours, both Black and White, who tell her she should go back from whence she came. Bol and Rial soon experience mysterious phenomena in their new home: weird sounds from behind the walls; and soon Nyagak appears along with a strange man. Nyagak is dressed up in beads, and her face painted, very different to how we see her in the initial flashbacks to when they left South Sudan. The man who appears with Ngarak makes strange ghoulish clicking sounds and they both disappear and reappear into the walls. Rial argues that the man is a night witch, or "apeth". Which comes from Sudanese Dinka culture, a mythological figure; a ghostly being that exists in south Sudanese folklore. "*Apeth* is an explanation for certain misfortunes which the Dinka think that human beings bring directly upon each other, without the necessary aid of spells, rites, magical materials, or non-human agents" (Lienhardt 1953:303). The

Dinka are taught that there are individuals in their community or society who may cause harm to their fellow community members by staring at them or by turning their attention on them. A night witch and ghouls, as well as their dead daughter haunt them, most especially Bol, in their sleep and during their waking hours. Rial believes that the apeth or night witch want them to repay a "debt", but it is not clear what the "debt" is. Bol burns everything they managed to bring over with them, but the apeth keeps appearing, with surrealistic close-ups and terrifying sounds. Bol rips holes in the walls trying to get to the apeth. He begs the government for a new house – but obviously the government is not prepared to do so, especially after they see the state that it is now in because of Bol's knocking of holes and ripping off of wallpaper. While the government try to decide what to do with them. The film does not end there – there is the debt that needs to be discovered; where they both move from being victims to perpetrators, but I discuss that in detail further on.

This brings me to my theoretical framework: The word "trauma" literally means "wound". Sigmund Freud first wrote about psychical wounds in the early 1900s when he created his psychoanalytic theory in-order-to try and understand these mental traumata. Trauma and Memory Studies is a relatively new field of study, barely 40 years old. In the early 1990s, as the Humanities took an ethical turn, Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996, 2003), published her ground-breaking works, based on the early works of Freud. She defines trauma as an event that is so overwhelming that it causes a delay of knowing that the trauma has even occurred. Trauma and Memory Studies traverses a large geographical area: ranging from the individual to countries, communities, societies, and includes historical and individual events. Not only that but it involves relationships "between individuals, peoples and structures of power and oppression" Hodgin & Thakkar 2017:1). This emerging field has seen an abundance

of research of trauma and memory in national, local and transnational contexts. There are numerous different topics on trauma, from national economic, or environmental disasters; incest; abuse; genocide; psychical and physical injuries - such as separation; abandonment, and betrayal.

The American Psychiatric Association also includes witnessing events of serious injury or unnatural death of another person due to violent assault, accident, war or disaster as traumatic events. The work being done is both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary (APA cited in Walker 2005:03). And psychologists look for (The DSM-IV and DSM-V Psychiatric Index 271-280) the following symptoms of trauma: Avoidance of, or efforts, to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s). Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).

Re-occurring, involuntary and intrusive upsetting memories of the event; repeated upsetting dreams, disassociation; flashbacks; hallucinations; a complete lack of awareness of present surroundings. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolise or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event/s; the inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event. Persistent negative emotional state of fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame. Detachment; “depersonalization”: the tenacious or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body, for example, feeling as though one were in a dream; feeling a sense of unreality of self or body or of time moving slowly. Derealisation: that is the persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings, for example, the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted (APA 2013a:271-272).

Individuals have flashbacks; there are often symptoms of denialism; repression; nightmares; dis-identification; surrealist images; and lack of speech. Because of this lack of speech, the imagined and imaginary become important for re-memberings being re-enacted and re-remembered, that is, in texts such as films. Because language and the spoken word are often so inadequate at describing the events that have happened, it falls to the imagination and imagery or imaginary to depict the unthinkable and the unknowable (cf. Laub1995; Felman1995; Caruth1995). The imaginary does not necessarily bring about closure but aims to bear witness.

According to these theories of disassociated trauma, the memory of the event tries to find its way out of repression and denial and into consciousness. However, this "ends up only leaking its disturbing and ambivalent traces in the typical traumatic symptoms of flashbacks, hallucinations, phobias, and nightmares." (Wang & Kaplan 2008:13). It also "revises" memories of the trauma to try and make sense of it, but it turns into repetitive revision of the memories that are then linked to fantasy (Kaplan and Wang 2008:13). These types of symptoms; the flashbacks, nightmares and phobias are therefore linked to fragmentary fantasy where the memories are revised and even reinvented. These are also cinematic tropes found in films which try to represent the unthinkable. While there are other ways of representing trauma in cinema, without such cinematic techniques that mimic the symptoms of trauma, this paper focuses on the complex dissociative type of representation or re-presentation of memories of the traumas. Ultimately, whatever tropes and motifs that may be used, the films bear witness. Bearing "witness" is not only about empathetic identification without vicarious traumatisation, the film allows the viewer to keep a cognitive distance. Audiences are powerfully moved by the images and stories but they do not appropriate that trauma for themselves. Dori Laub and Robert Lifton (cited in Kapland and Wang 2008:13)

argue that films reassert both continuity and humanity. The imagination is a social imaginary: it is in the retelling and visual representation, that traces of trauma can be preserved and transmitted, however unsatisfactory or even "improper" or inaccurate that representation may be. Because films do not just mirror traumatic experiences films "have become a cultural institution in which the traumatic experience … can be recognized, negotiated, and reconfigured" (Kaplan and Wang 2008). For example Johsua Hirsch (cited in Kaplan and Wang 2018) argues that collective traumas can move from witnessing, to mourning, to reconciliation and to forgiveness; thereby healing the psychic wounds of culture and the collective of the social body. Films play a role in this healing process by reproducing the unthinkable, by presenting context in which that trauma has played out.

Janet Walker (2015) argues that the most meaningful of the films that deal with trauma are "fragmentary, and striated with fantasy constructions", as such Walker also adheres to the dissociative narrative and imaginary of the representation of trauma on screen. But that is not the only way in which films represent or re-present trauma: there are documentaries; and films with straightforward narratives and stories. *His House*, the film I will be analysing tonight falls into the dissociative narrative of surrealism, fantasy and horror.

Thus Trauma and memory studies, is, as already stated, concerned with films being "memory texts"; that is, cinematic texts that are not only mere "reflections of historical actualities, but actually have memories entrenched in their narratives" (Karam 2016):

> [c]inema … is peculiarly capable of enacting not only the very activity of remembering, but also ways of remembering that are commonly shared; it is therefore peculiarly capable of bringing together personal experiences and

larger systems and processes of cultural memory (Kuhn 2010:299, 303; cf. Karam 2016).

Film maker and scholar, Sigfried Kracauer (1997:306) also argues that filmic texts are the perfect means for “passing on memories” as well as allowing audiences to confront horrors they cannot confront in their everyday realities.

Reading back and forth between trauma and cinema, one will see that we “compose our conscious and unconscious means for remembering and representing catastrophic events” (Walker 2005:7). Lenore Terr argues that traumas “will often be accompanied by symptoms of post-traumatic stress, which is itself is often accompanied by disruption and disassociation” (cited in Walker 2005:7).There is a “fantasy/reality duality … between mental imagery and an independent creation of the mind and the real world events that contribute memory’s pallet, its graphic qualities, and its repertoire of characters and narratives” (Terr cited in Walker 2005:7). And indeed in the film itself with surrealist palettes of colours and imaginaries: the past is “painted” in bright colours and that is contrasted with the surrealism of their hauntings: the ghouls who taunt them as well as the night witch and even their daughter who appears adorned in beads and white paints on her face. A stark disparity to how she was in reality – wearing dirty clothes and carrying a filthy white doll with a broken dress and beads. The surrealism of the ghostings which seem to refer to the past contrast with their present day: the overcast, continually raining United Kingdom, where everything is drab – the houses are al the same grey colours and everyone seems to dress in beige and taupe.

The analysis of this film uses the ground-breaking work of Cathy Caruth (1995 and 1996). With Cathy Caruth's (1995:17; Caruth 1996) explanation of trauma, it is not the experience itself that produces the traumatic effect but rather the remembrance of it. In her account there is always a time lapse, a period of "latency" in which forgetting is characteristic, between the event and the experience of trauma. It is an overwhelming "stress" that exceeds one's ability to cope or integrate the emotions involved with that experience (Caruth 1995:3). They are "circumstances" that are outside the realm of normal human experience. A traumatic event involves one experience, or repeating events, with the sense of being overwhelmed, that can be delayed by weeks, years, or even decades as the person struggles to cope with immediate circumstances. Eventually leading to serious, long-term negative consequences, often overlooked by mental health professionals. This is in line with what Judith Herman, who argues that "[t]raumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (1992:4). Since Caruth's ground-breaking works other scholars have conjectured about collective traumas (cf. Alexander 2001 and 2016; Eyerman 2001 and 2007; Craps and Rothberg 2011; Herrero and Allué 2004; Hirsch 1997, 2003 and 2012; Rothberg 2009). Trauma and Memory Studies initially both focused on "iconic" cultural traumas, such as the Holocaust and other genocides, and the resulting traumas on the individual (Karam 2021). And in the past, Trauma Studies often excluded both historical and/or cultural context/s. This is up until more recently (circa 1997) with, for example Marianna Hirsch recognising inter-generational and post-memory and post-history traumas (1997; 2012).   Also, with Michael Rothberg in his book *Multidirectional Memory*, who calls for a recognition of cross-cultural and cross-generational traumas, or what he refers to as a "multidirectionality of traumas" (2009). Which looks not only at "iconic" traumas, such

as the Holocaust, but other historical traumas, such as the Atlantic Slave Trade, apartheid; colonisation; capitalism; and imperialism (Rothberg 2009; cf. Karam 2012; Karam 2021). Thus, Trauma and Memory Studies have moved on from an emphasis on only the individual, but now also takes cognisance of the both the historical and cultural contexts in which these traumas occurred. Returning to Caruth, she herself has emphasised that "history is a symptom" (1995). Thus, traumas are linked to historical contexts and eras, and individuals "inherit" these traumas. Which then is experienced as types of "ghostings" or "hauntings" (Karam 2021). Similarly, Herrero and Allué also postulate that history and individual trauma are inextricably bound (2011; Karam 2021). And Judith Butler has suggested that "isolating the individuals [trauma] absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events" (2004:5). This is especially important in understanding historical traumas, such as slavery, colonisation and apartheid, and how these traumas are inherited by the following generations. "Cultural traumas are a constant, they are recurring and ongoing, an often daily, struggle" (Karam 2021:236). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that both individual trauma as experienced, and the historical context in which these traumas transpire, are pertinent to understanding collective trauma. Also, I believe that they are indivisibly bound (cf. Herrero and Allué 2011; Karam 2021). In addition, "by extension, cultural and ethnic traumas" are also considered to be collective traumas (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 2011:I; Karam 2021). Moreover, Herrero and Baelo-Allué argue that collective and individual traumata "in literature has become one of the most common ways of expressing and representing trauma" (2011:i). I extend that to include cinematic texts, themselves cultural artefacts, commonly representing such traumas, and that includes *His House* (cf. Karam 2021). It is important to note that Caruth also specifically argues that psychoanalytical, textual

and deconstructive theories can afford audiences an empathy with filmic texts that bear witness to reprehensible and un-representable traumatic events (1995; 1996; 2003; Karam 2021). This is the importance of Trauma and Memory Studies theory in understanding and elucidating the trauma in the film *His House,* where we have both individual trauma and cultural trauma. The individual trauma is most apparent when looking at the character, Rial: she seems depressed; distant; she stays in bed all day and night, but often does not sleep; she does not want to venture out of their new "home". We assume that this is because her daughter drowned and because she was escaping the unrest in her country. Perhaps she is is even experiencing survival guilt. We only know the answer closer to the end of the film, when all is revealed. I now turn to historical trauma.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Historical trauma refers to a cumulative psychical wounding, surpassing an individual's lifespan, and spreading across generations, caused by considerable traumatic experiences that have occurred within a specific group (LaCapra 2001:116). The historical trauma results in a response that is an assemblage of elements in relation to this trauma. For example, the devastating trauma of genocide; loss of religion; loss of culture; forcible removals from family and/or communities; slavery; rape; child abuse. Traumas which are *unresolved* and therefore the traumas remain an (open) wound in the lives of people who either experienced it first-hand, or inherited it. This would also include apartheid and colonisation. "In historical trauma, the traumatizing events may at least in principle be determined with a high degree of determinacy and objective" (LaCapra 2001:116). In reality this determination of such past traumatic events poses even greater complications of a different kind, for obvious reasons: our access to such events are mediated "through various traces or residues-memory,

testimony, documentation and representations or art and cognitive control" (LaCapra 2001:117).

Historical trauma is also an example of "transgenerational trauma" (LaCapra 2001; cf. Hirsch 2003; 2004; 2012; cf. Karam 2016). Dominick LaCapra (2001) argues that the effects of any kind of collective, historical traumas and traumatic events, can be transmitted to individuals of further generations. Furthermore, LaCapra suggests that historical trauma is in itself a "shattering experience" (2001:116). Furthermore, the "radically disorienting experience of historical trauma" frequently involves a dissociation between understanding and impact, mostly due to the generational gap (LaCapra 2001:117). In other words, an historical traumatic experience in an individual can present with symptoms of numbness of what one cannot feel. And an individual can feel overwhelmed by what one is unable to control (2001). Thus, as a reflective/reflexive process, trauma links the past to the present through various (and often diverse) representations and (re)imagination. In addition, historical trauma can also lead to a distorted subject/identity-formation where

> certain subject-positions may become especially prominent or even overwhelming, for example those of victim or perpetrator … wherein one is possessed but the past tends to repeat it compulsively as if it were truly present (LaCapra 1985:12).

Thus, the unresolved trauma can be viewed as a living thing – or a presentist lived reality.

All of this depends on both the context and the trauma in question. Trauma is itself a "disruptive experience that disarticulates the self" and generates psychical gaps in one's experiences and life (LaCapra 2001:41). Trauma, as discussed above, has belated effects, one's that are sometimes mastered and controlled (depending on one's context in receiving medical care), but in most cases, the trauma leaves invisible scars that are never overcome (LaCapra 2001:41; cf. Caruth 1995 and 1996). Obviously, some traumatic instances are more traumatic than others, and it depends on how the individual or the collective respond the those traumas. For some, those who have the options and ability can go for trauma counselling might even someday lead normal lives. For others, especially those who experience trauma on a daily basis, and no such options are available, due to circumstances and status, the trauma and its effects are lifelong. Dominick LaCapra, also writes in his book, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) about the symptomatic aftereffects of such monumental traumas. He details post-traumatic testimonies and sheds light on the various post-traumatic stresses experienced: some of which are acted out by individuals in post-stress trauma; while some individuals successfully work through their trauma. He identifies many symptoms; such as undecidability; disarticulating relations; confusing the self and the other; the collapse of all distinctions, including that between the past and the present. These symptoms prevail in those who inherited the trauma, in their post-traumatic acting out; in which an individual is "haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" (LaCapra 2001:116). These are "scenes" in which the past returns repeatedly and the future is blocked; or "fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop" (LaCapra 2001:116). For LaCapra, a sufferer who acts out their trauma, when they are unable to forget their past historical (collective) traumatic situation usually presents with self-

destructive behaviour (such as violence, drug addiction, and even suicide) (1985). This is the complete opposite of someone who has worked through their trauma: they are able to distinguish between past and present. They can recall (in terms of memory) that something happened to one (or one's people) generations ago. But all the while recognising, that one is living in the here and now; with options in the future and some form of positivity (LaCapra 1985:22).

Sudan as it was once known , was colonised first by the Turkish; then by the Belgium; and then by the United kingdom. It has suffered all the consequences of that colonialism: rape of land; misplaced peoples; poverty; civil war and atrocities. In South Sudan, where Rial and Bol are from, there has been more civil unrest and war since 2013, where the rebel "White army" – sometimes referred to as White army after they smear white ash on themselves, kill everyone they even suspected of supporting the government. In one instance, approximately 200 people in a single mosque were murdered and others in churches and aid-agency compounds. Radio broadcasts were used to stir up ethnic violence and hatred: directing the violence towards the perceived enemies of Mr Riek Machar – then vice President. It was the sacking of Mr Machar by President Salva Kiir in 2013 that led to the civil war that erupted in the region. Members of Mr Machar's Nuer tribe with encouraged to cheer on the violence. In the aftermath piles and piles of bodies were in evidence, mainly unarmed civilians. The massacre increased the animosity of Dinkas and ethnic Nuer in Bahr el Ghazal.

South Sudan fell into civil war two years after it won independence from Sudan in December 2013. When the war broke out, President Kiir an ethnic Dinka, accused Vice president Mr Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer, of heading up an attempted military coup in Juba, a capital city, this later intensified into a full-blown rebellion. More than

1.5 million people have fled the East African nation, “creating Africa’s largest refugee crisis” (Muhumuza 2017).

In 2017, Priti Patel British MP, a member of the Conservative party, visited the south Sudan says that South Sudan has entire villages burned down and food is being with held. She also visited neighbouring Uganda where more than 800 000 South Sudanese’s are sheltering. Hundreds of thousands of refugees continue to flee the South Sudanese areas among increased reporting of “targeted ethnic killings perpetrated by mostly government forces” (Muhumuza 2017). Massacres are taking place; people’s throats are being slit; civilians are tortured; horrific other atrocities such as being forced to eat human flesh and jump into fires are also reported (Muhumuza 2017).

A United Nations report, also in 2017, depicts South Sudan as being on the brink of genocide and in the middle of what can only be called “ethnic cleansing” in this civil war. They also encountered scorched earth policy. Starvation is used as a weapon of war, where aid is controlled by different groups of people and withholding of the food; people are at the brink of “physical and cultural extinction”. Rape has been weaponised: one victim told how she watch the soldiers rape a woman and then cut out her genitalia for “being stubborn” (Lynch 2017). Heinous atrocities occur on a daily basis.

In the film, Rial tells the nurse that she has scarified her body of both tribes, while she does not say which tribes, we can assum it is that of the Dinka and the Nuer because they are the dominant tribes in South Sudan. Rial says she belongs to neither, she simply scarified herself in order to protect herself from the fighting between the Nuer and the Dinka.

Historical trauma and cultural trauma resonate with each other, and we now turn to an overview of Cultural Trauma as elucidated by Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey C Alexander.

Cultural Trauma

Cultural Trauma theory was developed by theorists Jeffrey C Alexander and Ron Eyerman, both of whom depict traumas that shatter individual and/or collective lives. It includes the shocking events that occur in a certain society which affect the group of people living in that society. "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectively feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves incredible marks upon their group consciousness, making their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004: 18; cf. 2016). Collective trauma as defined by Eyerman is a "tear in the social frabic" or a "societal wound" (2004:4). And I would argue that this wound, in many cases is still open, as with both colonisation and slavery. As one can see, cultural trauma has a lot in common with how historical trauma is defined. Hans Haferkamp and Neil J Smelser postulate that cultural traumas can include processes of social change that lead to traumatic effects, this "includes mass migrations, wars, mass employment, and dislocations" (1992: 31). As with historical traumas, one can add forced removals; slavery; and group abductions and, violence. Those are not the only to terrifying cultural events that result in collective trauma, there are also more deceptive forms of trauma, such as capitalism; racism; prejudice; and poverty. These, when experienced systematically over time, have a cumulative effect that is fundamentally life altering. For Jeffrey C Alexander, cultural trauma occurs when a

> member of a collective feel, they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their unconsciousness, marking their

> memories forever and changing their further identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (cited in Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztomka 2004:10).

In this case, trauma shatters the collective's sense of well-being. It affects the individual and leads them to suffer. It is life changing. As already stated, trauma, in this case, collective trauma, connotes a sudden, overwhelming experience, and stress (Caruth 1995:3). It can even lead to prolonged, lifelong suffering and depression. Either for the individual, or as part of a collective.

Scholar Alexander (2016) adds to his earlier theorisations on cultural trauma, which to reiterate, he argues as occurring when members of a community or culture, feel that they have been subjected to an horrific event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness. One that stains their memories forever and changes their identity and futures in essential and irrevocable ways (cf. LaCapra 2001). Cultural traumas, in social groups, national societies, and even entire civilizations, are when individuals come together to cognitively identify the existence of the trauma, and the source of collective human suffering. Alexander argues further that they may not only identify it but may also feel moral responsibility for it (2016:3). He in fact makes two arguments here. In the one instance, he argues that members of a collective may take responsibility for the cultural traumas, thereby allowing them to empathise with others. In the second instance, he argues that social groups refuse to recognise the existence of other human beings suffering, or they abdicate responsibility for it, onto others, and not themselves. And they do not see themselves as complicit in any way (Alexander 2016:3).

Neil J Smelser (cited in Alexander *et al*. 2004:44) offers a highly significant definition of cultural trauma: it is a

> memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one of more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions.

Similarly, Arthur Neal (1998:61) defines a "national trauma" according to its "enduring effects" and as relating to events which "cannot be easily dismissed, which will be played over again and again in individual consciousness" becoming "ingrained in collective memory". Through representations in the media; through ritual reconstruction and memorials. As such cultural trauma almost always engages in a "meaning struggle"; a wrestling with an event that involves recognising the "nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility" (Eyerman 2001:21). Eyerman (2001:7) refers to this as the "trauma process" when the collective experiences an immense disruption, and the collective crises becomes a crises of both identity and meaning. In the film, Bol, who starts to show episodes of mania and hysteria, locks Rial in the house. He offers the apeth, the night witch, a deal – his life for his "daughter's" Nyagak's, but the apeth refuses his offer. While we the audience do not yet understand the nature of the deal. This results in Bol going into a catatonic state. Meanwhile Rial "escapes" from the house, but inexplicably finds herself back in South Sudan in a familiar classroom. She sees her friends and colleagues, at first it is a happy re-membering, it is field with bright orange sunshine and the images are in palettes of oranges, yellows and reds – beautiful, crystal clear bright blue skies. But

then it turns into an horrendous flashback where all her friends appear as victims of an horrendous atrocity – a massacre and only Rial survives by hiding in a cupboard. This massacre is a collective horror – the social tear in the fabric of society that Eyerman and other scholars refer to. How do you overcome such an attack? Simply by belonging to the "wrong" group of individuals, she is targeted. But not only is she part of a targeted collective in her home country, South Sudan, but when she finds asylum in the United Kingdom she becomes part of another collective. Refugees. The displaced. And she is taunted by school children and her new neighbours where they tell her to go back home, even though ironically they too are refugees. Not only that but they both Rial and Bol have to ask for asylum by the very colonisers that raided and raped their land in the 1800s.

This leads me to the last type of trauma to be explicated in this paper, that of perpetrator trauma …..

PERPETRATOR TRAUMA

Trauma and Memory Studies have traditionally focused on the individual, most specifically on the victim and the victim's family/ies. However, in 2012 and 2013, scholar Raya Morag was the first scholar to focus on the on the filmic representation of perpetrators, beginning with her analysis of Israeli documentaries. The term, "perpetrator trauma", itself was defined in Rachel M. MacNair's 2002 paper entitled *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing*, which examines individuals who perpetrate various atrocities. From the outset, the term and theory surrounding perpetrator trauma was beset with problems and seen as highly contentious. Many scholars even refused to accept that perpetrator trauma existed. For example, Dominick LaCapra, wrote in 2004 in his book *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, and Critical Theory* (2004, 113; Karam 2019) that "Nazi ideology

and practice were geared to creating perpetrators able to combine extreme, traumatizing, radically aggressive acts of violence with hardness that . . . foreclosed traumatization of the perpetrator." Ten years later, LaCapra, in his book *Writing History*, (2001/2014, 32/79; Karam 2019) recanted and finally acknowledge that there is a very real "possibility of perpetrator trauma".

Traditionally, perpetrators and their trauma have been ignored, and this is easily understandable, because, for many, the perpetrator is a "monster". If studies were focused on perpetrators, it was usually an attempt to decipher where his or her "inhumanity was birthed" (Karam 2019); and to probe their childhood experiences and identify their psychological defects (Karam 2019). But with apartheid, and other collective traumas, such as the Rwanda genocide; or the Serbian genocide; scholars started to realise that this so-called "monster" was not actually out there, but was our neighbour. This is especially important for certain countries, such as Chile, Bosnia, South Africa, Rwanda, and of course South Sudan, where perpetrators and victims have had to live side by side, following civil unrest and war.

The idea about perpetrator trauma is that "perpetrators can experience their crimes as trauma" (Mohamed 2015, 1162; Morag 2013; Karam 2019). That is, that the direct act of the atrocity itself "causes a psychological injury to the perpetrator, which can result in adverse physical, social, or emotional consequences' or symptoms" (Mohamed 2015, 1162). The perpetrator therefore experiences traumatic symptoms, similar to those experienced by victims. These symptoms can include: "intrusive and recurring flashbacks; avoidance of the place(s)/people/activities of the original trauma; insomnia; nightmares; fear; paranoia; and disassociations" (American Psychiatric Association 2000; Karam 2019). However, while this may be their experience, understanding perpetrator trauma requires a cognitive paradigm shift. The very very

presence of the perpetrator is a profound challenge to the society in which sh/e co-exists. S/he is also “a signifier of the society which precipitated his/her perpetration, and it is this dynamic (perpetrator/society) that is at the centre of this paradigmatic shift” (Karam 2019). The perpetrator cannot be disentangled, or detached from the context in which the crimes against humanity existed; or where the atrocities were enacted. These contexts include what is termed “new” wars, and scholars urge us to try and need to understand the ‘ethics derived from, and implicated in, new states of emergency’, which include non-combatants (Morag 2013, 6; cf. Crawford 2003; Karam 2019). Colonialism and apartheid are just two such examples. Raya Morag’s central position about perpetrators it is the refusal of both responsibility and accountability. Put another way, Morag argues that if a society refuses to accept and interrogate a perpetrator’s trauma, it is the very result of the refusal for that society or community to accept responsibility for putting the perpetrator in a position where they had to perpetrate atrocities against humanity. Most often at the command of their country or community (Morag 2013, 6; Karam 2019). Therefore, in-order-to understand perpetrator trauma, you need a society or a community to acknowledge its own role in the perpetration of such atrocities against collective Others (such as other ethnic groups), This is the challenge of societies who are aiming for reconciliation and forgiveness. This is what is needed to move forward into an integrated and fully functioning, and (ideally) democratic social order. Thus understanding, and interrogating perpetrator trauma is absolutely critical in-order-to promote peace. A community or society cannot even begin to heal, and reconcile if it denies the complicity of the very society which aims for reintegration or continues to live in denial. This is also because atrocities and violence often undergo a process of “naturalization” (Crawford, 1989; Karam 2019) and are thereof become difficult to notice, or

remembered. None more so than apartheid and colonisation, which was all performed "naturally" and assimilated through state apparatuses and institutions, such as religion, education, and the government. As Raul Hilberg wrote, "[w]ithout an insight into the actions of the perpetrators, one could not grasp history in its full dimensions" (1961/1996, 38; Karam 2019). Thus understanding perpetrator traumas, provides society with a more complete understanding of historical traumas, and its results. However, it must be noted that not all perpetrators experience trauma at their infliction of death violence and atrocities, such as torture. And their atrocities are not to be excused due to their having suffered from historical traumas, or childhood traumas; individuals must take responsibility for their actions.

In the film Bol manages to find Rial when she hides from the government forces shooting their way across the school where she taught. The area is littered with bodies and the sound of more gunshots. The violence in the region escalates. They find a bus that can take them to freedom and safety, and Rial gets on, but there are only two seats left and they are for adults with children. Bol, in a desperate move, abducts a little girl, Nyagak, falsely claiming she is his daughter. Rial watches him from her seat in the bus but does not intervene. The bus leaves the area and Nyagak's mother is left uncontrollably screaming for her child as the gunfire erupts all around her. Now we finally know what the debt is that Rial and Bol need to pay the apeth. When the boat capsises, neither Rial nor Bol can reach their so-called daughter in time to save her. Finally, in England, having accepted what they have done, Bol decides to repay the apeth by letting him into his skin. But Rial finds him and instead of accepting this alternative reality, slits the neck of the apeth's throat.

This is the debt that is implied from the very outset of the film, and that Rial speaks of to Bol. Bol has stolen a child for his own selfish purposes, leaving the mother in

anguished pain and the child, Nyagak, confused and in complete shock. The night witch, and all the ghouls that haunt him, that slither and click clack in the walls of the house stem from this moment. And not only does Bol steal a child leaving the mother behind t be killed by government forces, Rial sees him from where she has a seat in the truck and does not utter a word. Later on she draws the child close to her and says she wil take care of her. But ultimately she is complicit is this atrocity. These scenes are all the more shocking because of the coloured hues that that the film maker makes use of: bright blue skies; oranges and bright yellows; the beautiful dresses of the women whose bodies lay littered on the ground. The scene you would expect for a pick nick or some other social. Not a massacre. Not such an atrocity. In keeping with perpetrator trauma theory, the film asks you to consider the context: the civil war. Would Bol and Rial have committed such a crime if their own lives were not in danger? If there was no civil war; no soldiers running in the streets shooting up places, would Rial andBol acted in such a manner. They both suffer from perpetrator trauma, manifested in the night witch and ghouls, and their own so-called daughter: haunted constantly during the night and waking hours, but the question is would they e perpetrators at all if their circumstances were not different? Is society not to blame, at least in part? The film is self-reflexive in that it poses the unasked question: what would you do in a similar situation? In a civil war and your own life was in danger, just how far would you go?

There is no happy ending here: they cannot bring back their so-called “daughter” or the daughter’s actual mother. They cannot reverse their actions. They do seem to feel persecuted and remorseful. Once the debt has finally been identified, they no longer live in denialism and repression. Instead they then start to fix up the house together and the UK government decide to give them a second chance and let them continue

staying there. Mark, a representative from the detention centre, asks what happened to the witch, and they say Rial killed him. Everyone thinks this is funny and the government representatives leave the house. As they leave there is a final panning shot of the interior of the house, where it is filled with people: of the dead left behind, massacred in civil war; and of course Nyagak is there holding onto to Rial's hand. The implication is that they will live with the ghosts of their past, filling the house to the brim, but no one is smiling. The image contradicts the many traumas that all the ghosts have had to experience. But it does imply healing. The film seems to echo the words of LaCapra: there is the recognition that despite the historical, cultural, individual, and perpetrator trauma, that one is living in the here and now; with options in the future and some form of positivity (LaCapra 1985:22). From racism; seeking asylum in the land of the colonisers; the massacres; the taunting and bullying; the death of their "daughter"; the perpetration of an atrocious crime and the complicity of Rial's keeping quiet and not objecting to the abduction of Nyagak. Their dehumanisation. The slippery slope from victim to perpetrator. Thus this film is so much more than a horror film: it is a devastating social commentary. I therefore conclude this paper with two quotes. The one is from Justin Chang of the *Los Angeles Times* who described the film as "one …. in which suspense and social conscience effectively breathe as one" (2020).

The second quote is from German film historian Thomas Elsaesser who writes (2013:85; cf. Hodgin & Thakkar 2017):

> Through very different formal techniques, such films make us avert our eyes from sights that sear our conscience, and yet, we may feel the ethical impulse to look, and to look closely, in-order-to bear witness and assume the task of

testimony, as part of our humanity, our recognition of the other, and our willingness to acknowledge complicity and accountability.

Thus, *His House* (2020) tries to find a find a new narrative that “does not forget trauma but carries its traces [and trauma] forward” (Walker 2015; Kaplan and Wang 2008; insert my own).

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