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PHOTO-LITERATURE AND TRAUMA: FROM COLLECTIVE HISTORY TO CONNECTIVE MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the increased interest in word-image interactions and the recent proliferation of bimedial works of literature, this study embarks on an investigation of the inherent structures and particular qualities of the photo-novel, with the contention that this emergent new form constitutes a privileged space where instances of collective trauma may be addressed, potentially even represented. The corpus of this dissertation consists in three novels set during a war—namely Richard Powers’s *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), E. L. Doctorow’s *The March* (2005) and Beryl Bainbridge’s *Master Georgie* (1998) that unfold against the backdrop of WW1, the American Civil War and the Crimean War respectively—W. G. Sebald’s approach of the Holocaust, in his novels *The Emigrants* (1992-6) and *Austerlitz* (2001), and the literary attempts to discuss 9/11 performed by Don DeLillo in *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). The exploration of works of photo-literature of the late 20th and early 21st century that are affiliated to historiography and unfold in the midst or aftermath of a great historic calamity suggests that the combination of fiction and photography within a single, photo-textual narrative may counter the problematic of unrepresentability raised by Trauma Studies. Liliane Louvel’s work on word-

image relations and, in particular, her concept of the “pictorial third,” constitutes the dominant methodological tool of this research which is also informed by the foundational writings in the field of Trauma Studies—specifically, Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma, Shoshana Felman’s and Dori Laub’s work on testimony and witnessing, Ulrich Baer’s and Marianne Hirsch’s critical writings on the photography of trauma, but also, mainly, Dominick LaCapra’s notions of “working through” and “acting out” the traumatic experience—as well Hayden White’s and Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the historical event, Pierre Nora’s work on the passage from history to memory, Susan Sontag’s, W. J. T. Mitchell’s or Georges Didi-Huberman’s writings on photography and the image, and, predominantly, Roland Barthes’s groundbreaking notions of the photographic referent, temporality and message, visual literacy and the plural text.

Photo-literature, as this study purports, employs photography’s relations to history, biography, time and death within the familiar schema of the novel, while elevating the respondent reader as an essential component of the meaning-making process. These elaborate workings of the photo-textual compound result in the highlighting of the individual life story’s pertinence to the collective experience and the establishment of parallels between diverse historical instances of trauma. Thus, photo-literature enables the passage from history to an essentially connective type of memory and, subsequently, responds to the professed inability to enunciate the traumatic experience, by offering an approach that is reliant on affective investment and attention.