

POST-APOCALYPTIC STRESS DISORDER IN *THE LEFTOVERS*SONIA FRONT¹

ABSTRACT

In Tom Perrotta's novel, *The Leftovers* (2011), and the TV series (2014–2017) based on the novel, 2% (140 million) of the world's population vanish into thin air. The event constitutes a temporal rift that divides history into Before and After and inaugurates a new mode of temporality, marked by a break with a clock-time-based economy and a yearning for the ultimate end. This new mode of temporality is accompanied by the shattering of the individual sense of being-in-time. The essay focuses on the altered experience of time both on individual and collective levels, a condition that constitutes a kind of post-apocalyptic stress disorder. The characters' reactions to the traumatic experience demonstrate that the inexplicability of the apocalyptic event and duration without closure are psychologically intolerable. As closure is impossible, they cannot work through the trauma, remaining trapped in the past event and the present anticipation of the ultimate annihilation while the future horizon becomes obliterated.

Keywords: *The Leftovers*; trauma; trauma and temporality; apocalypse; acting out; working through.

1. Introduction

Apocalyptic plots have evolved from the early twentieth-century visions of a plague that annihilates the world population except for one survivor, to plots featuring a nuclear catastrophe after World War II, to human-made ecological disaster scenarios in the twenty-first century (Miller 2012: 31, 33). Twenty-first-century fiction also features a cluster of narratives in which the disaster takes the form of an inexplicable event that shatters people's worldview and sets off a pervasive existential crisis, accompanied by bouts of irrational behaviour or total nihilism. Examples of such fictions include *The 4400* (René Echevarria, Scott Peters, 2004–2007), in which 4400 people who have been missing for the past

¹ Institute of Literary Studies, ul. Grota-Roweckiego 5, 41–205 Sosnowiec, University of Silesia, Poland, email: sonia.front@es.edu.pl.

fifty years suddenly reappear; *The Event* (Nick Wauters, 2010–2011), in which a passenger plane hurtles toward the President to suddenly disappear in a vortex; Robert J. Sawyer’s novel *FlashForward* (1999) and the show with the same title (Brannon Braga, David S. Goyer, 2009–2010), in which everyone on the planet blacks out for 2 minutes 17 seconds, during which they experience a memory of the future; the series *Manifest* (Jeff Rake, 2018–), in which a plane flies from Jamaica to New York through some turbulence, yet when it lands, it appears to have been gone for five and a half years; and Tom Perrotta’s novel *The Leftovers* (2011) and the show (Damon Lindelof & Tom Perrotta, 2014–2017) under the same title – the subject of this essay – in which 2% (140 million) of the world’s population disappear in unexplained circumstances.

In their inexplicability and spectrality, these fictional catastrophes embody a new type of threat prevalent in the twenty-first century. The new century is haunted by what Slavoj Žižek calls “the spectre of ‘immaterial’ war”, the war with terror, in which “the attack is invisible – viruses, poisons, which can be anywhere and nowhere... the known universe starts to collapse, life disintegrates” (Žižek 2002: 37). Žižek asks, “What will war mean in the twenty-first century? Who will be ‘them’ if they are, clearly, neither states nor criminal gangs?” (Žižek 2002: 37). How to live in this post-catastrophe world? Twenty-first-century cultural productions probe these questions, reflecting post-catastrophe fears of terror and a complete loss of psychological security.

The catastrophe inaugurates a new mode of temporality, the time of an aftermath that is qualitatively different from the time of before. Frank Kermode has described the new time as a period of transition before the proper end, characterized by belatedness; a sort of posthumousness and spectral endurance, “a period which does not properly belong either to the End or to the *saeculum* preceding it” (Kermode 2000 [1967]: 12). This period of transition is metered out in *The Leftovers* by anniversaries. They measure the new time through chronological divisions that, as Kermode puts it, “are made to bear the weight of our anxieties and hopes” and which help to identify beginnings and ends that appeal to our “permanent need to live by the pattern” (Kermode 2000 [1967]: 11). The new time becomes the time of awaiting a subsequent build-up toward a predetermined goal: another catastrophic event, which will, this time, bring total annihilation. If postmodernist apocalyptic plots follow the pattern of destruction and renewal (Gomel 2012: 121), in twenty-first-century fiction whilst some of them still do so, others, including *The Leftovers*, express a yearning for the ultimate end. Kermode argues that our need for the apocalypse represents “our deep need for intelligible Ends”, because “[w]e project ourselves ... past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (Kermode 2000 [1967]: 8). That ultimate end is necessary to make sense of the world because the “concordance of beginning, middle, and end” is

“the essence of our explanatory fictions” (Kermode 2000 [1967]: 35–36). The catastrophe – random and incomprehensible now – will only reveal its significance when it is collated with the end.

The sense of a new temporal mode coincides in *The Leftovers* with a traumatic disruption of temporality. Trauma and traumatic experience have been accentuated in fiction in the last thirty years. Referring to the many violent historical events, some critics claim that trauma is one of the twentieth century’s prevalent conditions. Roger Luckhurst has proposed the term “traumaculture” to designate this trend in the 1990s fiction and has identified a new type of subjectivity revolving around the notion of trauma which engages “overlapping psychiatric, medical, legal, journalistic, sociological, cultural, theoretical and aesthetic languages” (Luckhurst 2003b: 28). Traumaculture is marked by the performance and exhibition of traumatic experience in public, for example, through a memoir whose function is to assist in coming to terms with the traumatic experience. Luckhurst’s concept thereby articulates individual subjectivity and a sense of one’s disorderly personal history.

Conversely, Philip Tew has proposed the notion of the “traumatological culture” to refer to the post-9/11 cultural disposition that pervades both selfhood and artistic representations of this perspective (Tew 2007: 199). He argues that 9/11 generated a collective sense of trauma that impacted the collective cultural psychology. The new disposition integrates individual with collective manifestations of trauma. This combination of the private and public registers creates “the vague and shifting lines between the singularity or privacy of the subject, on the one side, and collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing on the other” (Seltzer 1997: 4). The traumatological thus addresses specific and collective fears, investigating “a notion of their radical threat to both the individual and one’s sense of collectivity” (Tew 2007: 192).

Kai Erikson writes more broadly about the distinction between individual and collective trauma. She theorizes individual trauma as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively”, in contradistinction to collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality”. Conversely to individual trauma, collective trauma does not occur suddenly, but it entails “a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared” (Erikson 1976: 153–154). Collective trauma, also called “cultural trauma”, takes place when a community experiences an event that impacts group consciousness and memory, displaces the community’s “patterned meanings” and alters their identity in an irreversible manner (Alexander 2004: 1, 10). Affecting the whole community, cultural trauma not only brings distress and anxiety to individuals but can also alter the entire

tissue of a community, influencing relationships, changing government's processes and policies, and the way the community operates (cf. Chang 2017 and Hirschberger 2018).

Similarly to 9/11, in *The Leftovers*, the inexplicable apocalyptic event plunges the inhabitants of a fictional town of Mapleton, New York, into a traumatological culture that combines individual manifestations of the traumatic event with broader cultural anxiety and a collective sense of trauma. The effects of the trauma reveal themselves in the shattering of temporality, both on the individual and collective levels, a condition that constitutes a kind of post-apocalyptic stress disorder. On the collective level, the event yields the time of the aftermath mentioned above, a new period that cannot be assimilated into the normal temporal ordering of history because of the immensity and unaccountability of the catastrophe. On a personal level, the zero event leads to the disruption of the individual sense of being-in-time. Employing relevant theories of trauma, this essay will concentrate on the altered experience of time and its most extreme manifestations. One of the most radical reactions to the traumatic experience is that of a nihilistic movement, the Guilty Remnant, who get imprisoned in the past and allow their identity to revolve around the traumatic occurrence, becoming the representation of the trauma themselves. Other extreme responses are those of Nora (Carrie Coon), who, after losing her whole family, experiences endless grieving, ready to risk her life and cross worlds to heal, and Kevin's (Justin Theroux), who splits into the Before and After personae to operate on several layers of reality. The characters' reactions demonstrate that the inexplicability of the traumatic event and duration without closure are psychologically unendurable. Closure, in their case, could be brought about by providing a "meaning-making narrative" (Yoder 2015: 35) that would explain the disappearances and enable active forgetting. As this is impossible, the characters cannot work through the trauma, remaining arrested in the past event and the present anticipation of the ultimate annihilation while the future horizon becomes obliterated. The traumatic experience begets endless pain and results in political disengagement or violence, instigating the dissolution of the fabric of society.

The show adapts the novel which functions as its starting point. The first season loosely follows the book, rewriting it and adding literary subtexts, such as Yeats's poem, the legend of Saint Hubertus, and an issue of *National Geographic*, which help to punctuate the story with surreal, odd, and puzzling events (symbolic animals, supernatural elements, and sleepwalking scenes). The show also transforms the protagonist Kevin Garvey, a conciliatory mayor from the novel, recognized as bland and too marginal (Kachka 2014), into the anti-hero of the unhinged, tormented police chief. Reinventing some of the novel's scenes and characters, the series responds to contemporary televisual trends to become an instance of narrative complexity (cf. Mittel 2015). Narrative reconfiguration, the

new threads and violent confrontations resulting from the repressed grief underscore the sense of loss (Joseph & Letort 2017: 2) that pervades the story.

The book purveys the reader with insights into the characters' psyches, granting them access to their motivations and psychological states, whereas the viewer is denied that information and confronted with pervasive silence instead. Damon Lindelof attests to the difficulties in understanding some characters, particularly the members of the Guilty Remnant who take a vow of silence: "It was hard to write. It was hard to watch. They're very cryptic and frustrating, for us as storytellers and also for the audience. Definitely interesting, but in terms of our presentation of them, just not as successful as other areas of the show" (VanDerWerff 2015). The book's renditions of emotions and psychological states are replaced in the series by odd and/or irrational actions that become indicative of deep psychological wounds. They also reveal a fracture in reality and the breakdown of rationality and old ways of being and living. While in the novel the characters experience the trauma as a private meditative affair, which is underlined by the polyphonic narration that locks each of them into isolation, in the series the interior experience is exteriorized and bursts into bizarre actions and events, disturbing images, and dream sequences. The shift from the interior life in the novel to the plot propelled by these manifestations of the trauma adds narrative dynamism and makes the show "propulsive" (Kachka 2014).

The series opens with the traumatic event itself, rather than – as the novel does – with one character's thoughts on the religious notion of Rapture and a brief description of the event three years later. This alteration plunges the viewer into the midst of panic, chaos, and confusion that the characters experience during the apocalyptic turning point. Removing the characters' thoughts, this sequence adds to the unknowability of the event and allows the viewer to confront their own emotions and fears. Season one becomes a relentless exploration of grief, depression, and existential loneliness. Continuing the story beyond the novel and intensifying its tragic tone, the show ventures much further in the depiction of the impact of the trauma: the outbursts of irrationality and existential crises, which seem proportionate to the irrationality of the event itself, and become reflected in the temporal contortions of the narrative framework. These alterations to the book turn the series into a new entity, anchored in the novel but gaining its own independent identity.

2. Trauma and temporality

The understanding of the working of trauma in the humanities has been dominated by the theories of Cathy Caruth, who lays out the main ideas in her books *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). Her model emphasizes such manifestations of trauma as

belatedness (the event is not experienced or assimilated fully at the time of occurrence), repression and amnesia, the literal character of traumatic memory, the suddenness and the overwhelming disposition of the event.² Despite being criticized, for instance by Alan Gibbs, as unfounded and inconsistent with empirical research (Gibbs 2014: 5–13), Caruth's theories have been very influential not only in cultural trauma studies but also in literary, cinematic, and televisual representations. Accordingly, the traumatized subject will typically (while in real life only sometimes) suffer from such symptoms as “involuntary flashbacks, nightmares, and cycles of repetitive, often self-destructive behaviour, without having access to memories of the originating cause” (Gibbs 2014: 25). This is also mostly the manner in which the effects of trauma are represented in *The Leftovers*.

The disruption in the experience of temporality is characteristic of the survivors of a traumatic event. As the psyche cannot incorporate the traumatic experience into a meaningful context (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 112), this failure results in long-term incapacitation in the form of obsessive living in the past. Caruth theorizes that the cognitive processing of trauma creates “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event” (Caruth 1995: 4) along with hypervigilance and numbing that began during or after the occurrence, or the complete blockage of thoughts connected with the trauma (Luckhurst 2008: 1). The compulsion to repeat, which manifests itself in the psyche's incessant return to the traumatic event, alters the structure of temporality by disturbing the relationship between past, present, and future. With the repetition, a traumatic experience becomes “freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped”, and which hinders a movement towards the future. The traumatic event thus upsets the “linearity and unity of our experience of time” as well as our sense of continuity over time. Through this, it can fracture or destroy one's sense of coherent selfhood (Stolorow 2007: 20).

In line with a psychoanalytic perspective, trauma can be overcome and psychological balance regained by “setting things right in the world” and “setting things right in the self” (Alexander 2004: 5). Drawing on psychoanalysis, Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” as responses to collective trauma. Acting out entails a compulsive tendency to relive the trauma. The subject becomes stuck in the past, incessantly bringing it to the present and destabilizing the future. They lead a constrained life, characterized by hypervigilance, disengagement from social life, and a need for security (LaCapra 2014: 142–143). This is a normal reaction to the trauma in its immediate aftermath; however, prolonged acting out becomes pathological and

² Trauma can also be insidious, i.e., a consequence of chronic oppressive situations (cf. Gibbs 2014: 15–17).

prevents closure. Working through, on the other hand, involves facing the trauma and bringing it to conscious perception through psychological introspection, gaining critical distance and comprehending the meaning of the traumatic event and its place in the historical context. For LaCapra, working through constitutes an “articulatory practice” that gradually allows the individual to differentiate between past, present, and future as well as facilitate the return to agency. Sometimes, however, even the problems already worked through may recur and require renewed attention and a different approach. Working through, therefore, is a process that may never entirely surpass acting out and that is never permanent. Simultaneously, acting out and working through should be comprehended as intimately related countervailing forces, rather than a binary opposition (LaCapra 2014: 144, 148–149).

Processing and recovering from a collective trauma require a necessary mechanism of “active forgetting”. Nietzsche’s notion – which finds its reflection in contemporary psychology as “active forgetting” or “selective forgetting” (cf. Anderson 2001) – should not be understood as a call to erase memories but as a powerful mechanism necessary for a culture to overcome trauma and prosper in the future. This can be achieved by integrating the trauma into the identity of the community so that it would cease to paralyze it. Active forgetting involves selective remembering; the ability to single out what enters consciousness and to suppress the recall of traumatic memories and thoughts (Nietzsche 1997 [1887]: 35). Trauma shatters our familiar views and assumptions about the world, ourselves and other people (on the assumptive world concept see Kauffman 2002; cf. also Shattered Assumptions Theory of Janoff-Bulman 1992). The only way to conquer the state of anxiety and confusion is through active forgetting. The first step in this process is the recognition of collective trauma. “Genuine recognition”, as Ciano Aydin writes, involves “knowing: (a) what exactly happened ...; (b) who was involved ...; (c) how it took place ...; (d) when it took place ...; and (e) why it took place” (Aydin 2017: 133). The second stage involves symbolic processing of the trauma, either individually or collectively, through mnemotechnologies, such as habits, customs, and rituals, whose role is “to shape the expression of emotion, guide behavior and offer meaning and closure, simultaneously strengthening the link of the individual to the social group and the group’s culture at large” (Aydin 2017: 134). The contradictory function of remembering and forgetting, as Aydin continues to explain, lies in the automatic and cyclical nature of these activities: repetition contributes to remembering, while automaticity of the routines encourages forgetting, hence active forgetting. The third stage of addressing the trauma – sublimation – deals with the reinterpretation of negative emotions into positive ones, for example, through art, film and music (Aydin 2017: 134–135).

3. Before and After

The disappearance of people in *The Leftovers* plays the role of the traumatic disruptor of temporality as it becomes “one of these enormous events that seem to divide history into Before and After” (Haupt 2014). The event creates a temporal rift and pushes the world toward a new mode of temporality, marked by inertia and a break with a clock-time-based economy. Derailing clock time, the temporal rift upsets late-capitalist labour time as the economy collapses “with the stock market plunging and consumer spending falling off a cliff” (*The Leftovers*, 55). As Helga Nowotny argues, the capitalist process of accumulation is rooted in the quantification of time and its acceleration situated in a historical perspective organized around the principle of linearity (cf. Nowotny 1994). In *The Leftovers*, that linear time with its frantic acceleration around the late capitalist economy, which alienated people from natural temporal cycles, has come to an end. The new form of temporality that follows assumes an unstructured quality in which neither clock time nor digital time, connected with information technology, meters out individual or collective existence. The catastrophe has thus produced an unbridgeable gap between the old and the new reality, which has led to the belated temporality of the aftermath, a kind of posthumousness, in which one can only languish without direction and wait for the ultimate annihilation. Like after 9/11, when, in Don DeLillo’s words, the future lay in the ruins, in *The Leftovers* the event has “changed the grain of the most routine moment” (DeLillo 2001). All previous endeavours and concerns have become meaningless in the face of the end, and the characters undergo a mental reboot that conflicts with progress, capitalism, and linear time.

In some characters, post-apocalyptic stress disorder manifests itself as the need for isolation and a restricted life. Accordingly, Kevin and Laurie Garvey (Amy Brenneman) and their teenage children, Jill (Margaret Qualley) and Tom (Chris Zylka), isolate themselves for weeks to watch movies and play board games to distract themselves from the hysteria of TV news and its endless compulsion to return to the zero event. Contemporary media, particularly television, according to E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, not only reflect those experiences but “in their courting and staging of violence, they are themselves the breeding ground of trauma” (Kaplan & Wang 2008: 17). That is why, rather than condemn themselves to the compulsion to watch or repeat the memory in the privacy of their thoughts, many people in *The Leftovers* throw themselves into “manic socializing”, “impromptu block parties that lasted for entire weekends, potluck dinners that stretched into sleepovers, quick hellos that turned into marathon gabfests. Bars were packed for months after October 14th; phone bills were exorbitant” (*The Leftovers*, 85). With time, however, social and familial ties disintegrate as neither the family nor the community provides effective support.

In other people, the symptoms of trauma present themselves as outbursts of severe irrationality. In the series, Kevin Garvey, Sr. (Scott Glenn), a respected chief of police and Mapleton's Man of the Year, hears voices and starts to collect aboriginal folklore songs in the belief that he can stop a second Biblical flood; Reverend Matt Jamison (Christopher Eccleston) and two other men write a book in which the Messiah is Kevin Garvey, their local police chief. Some people commit suicide, while others abandon all activity. The extreme reactions to the event encompass a "psychological apocalypse" (Perrotta, after Houpt 2014) and constitute coping mechanisms whose aim is to manage the pain and to bring about temporary relief. Other people oscillate in the middle ground between extreme behaviour and total nihilism. For instance, Jill Garvey suffers terribly after her mother abandons the family. She turns from a perfect student into one who skips school, smokes marijuana, and goes to parties every night, where she engages in teenage erotic games. Her new friend, Aimee, shows Jill "a new way of being herself", though to other people "the bad girl had corrupted the good one". Yet to Jill, the old way of living has exhausted itself and the new one in the changed grain of the moment "made as much sense right now as the old way of being had before" (*The Leftovers*, 41).

In the time of the aftermath, the "time of widespread uncertainty" and "an almost unbearable tension in the air, a mood of anxious waiting" (*The Leftovers*, 51, 55), all activity connected with work and education is suspended on the communal level and the whole world pauses in the anticipation of the end. The tension and stasis result from the lack of information on the event and its unrepresentability, a feature shared with 9/11. The threat of terrorism connected with 9/11 is usually described as spectral one, since, in the words of Wheeler W. Dixon, "the enemy being fought is both illusory and highly mobile, spreading throughout the world in numerous clandestine cells" (Dixon 2004: 1). Still, when the coverage of the disappearance in *The Leftovers* is compared to that of 9/11 – the repeated image of the burning towers – it appears that "October 14th was more amorphous, harder to pin down", there is no "single visual image to evoke the catastrophe" and no one to blame for it, no "bad guys to hate, which made everything that much harder to get into focus" (*The Leftovers*, 51). This unrepresentable and inexplicable nature of the zero event does not allow people to assimilate it and return to linear time because the first step to the reconciliation, as noted above, must be the recognition of the collective trauma. In the case of the disappearance, only the question of 'when' the event took place can be answered.

4. Christian "End Times"

The unthinkability of the traumatic event leading to the disruption of collective temporality and individual sense of being-in-time instigates intensified religious

activity as people seek to contextualize the event within Christian temporality, particularly within branches of American evangelicalism. They interpret the event as the biblical Rapture during which “[t]wo men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left” (*The Leftovers*, 111, qtd. from the Bible, Matthew 24: 40–42). They believe that they are approaching “the End Times”, together with “one big new war”, “the battle foretold in the Book of Revelation” (*The Leftovers*, 169). However, it transpires that those who have disappeared were not all Christian and not all good, a fact that the Reverend Jamison takes upon himself to prove, self-publishing a paper with articles on the unholy deeds of the disappeared and provoking people’s resentment and aggression in the process. It seems to have been “a random harvest” (*The Leftovers*, 3), and therefore people start to call the event the Sudden Departure.

Although the Mapletonians have developed a habit of celebrating anniversaries (skipping the first stage of processing the trauma and moving on to the second one), three years after the disappearance at the Departed Heroes’ Day of Remembrance and Reflection, “the invisible haze of stale grief and chronic bewilderment thicken[s] the air” (Perrotta 2011: 12), time still remains in stasis and a prolonged existential crisis continues. People waited for another event, “marinating in ominous speculation”, yet “NOTHING HAPPENED” (*The Leftovers*, 52, emphasis in original). However, some believers persist in attempts to situate the event within Christian chronology and the seventh anniversary is anticipated with much anxiety. For the “rapture of the church”, as explained by the Anglican clergyman John Darby, the seventh anniversary is significant as it ends a seven-year period of tribulation governed by the Antichrist. After that, Christ is supposed to come and establish the “Kingdom of the Thousand Years” before the dead are resurrected. Nevertheless, in *The Leftovers*, the seventh anniversary does not bring about the end of the world either. God’s failure to deliver the ultimate end makes it necessary for people to determine how to be in this amorphous time of the aftermath.

As the old religions do not provide satisfying answers, a variety of post-departure cults come into being, producing their own interpretations of the cataclysm and organizing the lives of their believers in an attempt to execute the first stage of processing the trauma. It seems “as if the religious clock got set back to zero by this event”, creating space for new religions, or “contemporary expressions of spirituality” beyond the popular ones (Haupt 2014). Some people find purpose in following a healer named Holy Wayne (Joseph Paterson) who allegedly possesses the ability to absorb other people’s pain. Tom Garvey, one of the followers, obsesses about his departed school friend, Verbecki, although he had not seen him for many years before the disappearance. Tom drops out of college, gives up his interests, gets drunk every night, lies to his parents and cannot imagine his future anymore; all because of the haunting question:

“Where the hell did you go, Verbecki?” (*The Leftovers*, 60). On the one hand, Tom feels a sense of relief that the worst thing has already happened. Everything he has worked for is in ruins but “for some reason he didn’t feel as heartbroken as he’d expected to. There was a definite sense of relief beneath the pain, the knowledge that the thing you’d been dreading had finally come to pass, that you no longer had to live in fear of it” (Perrotta 2011: 48). The Sudden Departure has undermined the narrative of personal development and self-realization, so he feels relief and freedom because he does not have to strive to situate himself in the capitalist hierarchy anymore; he does not have to succeed, to make something of himself. On the other hand, with this freedom comes a sense of lack of direction and purpose. Accordingly, joining Holy Wayne’s movement gives a purpose and meaning to Tom’s life.

However, Christianity and Holy Wayne’s cult provide only temporary consolation and meaning-making strategies. With time, they both become bankrupt in this respect, so their followers are forced to reconsider their position. It transpires that the catastrophe refuses to be supported by a religious framework, after all. The mystery of the disappearance will not be resolved, so the question to face now is how to create meaning in the time of the aftermath.

5. “We don’t smoke for enjoyment” – the Guilty Remnant

The most radical influence of the traumatic event on the experience of time on the collective level is that represented by the Guilty Remnant (G.R.), a nihilistic cult-like movement that comes into being a year after the disappearance and becomes a palpable spectral presence in the town. According to the G.R., the Sudden Departure does not constitute the onset of the new millennium, but a harbinger of the ultimate annihilation and a complete cessation of temporality. While some people – those who measure the new time by anniversaries of the catastrophe – wait for time to catch up, to inhabit the new millennium and take direction, resuming chronology, for the G.R. the return to the old time and the old world is impossible because “The old world is gone. It disappeared three years ago”, and “We belong to the new world” (*The Leftovers*, 201). The assumptions and values of the world from Before are not pertinent any more in this new radically distinct time, so the G.R. pursue “a new way of living, free from the old, discredited forms – no more marriage, no more families, no more consumerism, no more politics, no more conventional religion, no more mindless entertainment. Those days were done. All that remained for humanity was to hunker down and await the inevitable” (*The Leftovers*, 208).

Rather than be happy that the departure did not happen to them and celebrate “the myth of heroic survivors” (Matthews Jr. 2012: 50) as many post-apocalyptic

texts do, the G.R. feel like Rejects, “left behind” (*The Leftovers*, 3)³; the titular leftovers. For them, “it is not only the moment of the event but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*” (Caruth 1995: 9, emphasis in original). Burdened by survivors’ guilt, the G.R. see themselves as living reminders of what happened; as Caruth argues, the traumatized “carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth 1995: 5).

The cult’s simple lifestyle is designed in such a way as not to distract them from waiting for the ultimate end. Unable to move forward, the members of the cult abandon their families, lead minimalistic communal lives, wear white clothes, vow silence, and continually smoke cigarettes “to proclaim [their] faith” (*The Leftovers*, 202) (never saying in what). White clothes and silence seem to symbolize the spectrality of the traumatic event and the impossibility of verbalizing it and integrating it into one’s experience through language. They also signal post-apocalyptic depression, emptiness, and numbing; they become “the physical representation of the way depression makes people feel on the inside, stripped of all nuance or meaning, stripped of all self even, and reduced to a collection of faded beings, disappearing into the surroundings” (VanDerWerff 2014). White clothes embody the blank in people’s lives, inner void, and a loss of identity (Joseph & Letort 2017: 5).

The G.R. strive to prevent the integration of the trauma and the return to the twentieth-century sense of time, which is, in their opinion, exhausted. Their mission is “to resist the so-called Return to Normalcy, the day-to-day process of forgetting the Rapture, or, at the very least, of consigning it to the past, treating it as a part of the ongoing fabric of human history, rather than the cataclysm that had brought history to an end” (*The Leftovers*, 207). They want everyone to continue psychologically in the zero event, to wallow in the past, to get arrested in that moment, not to move on, not to recover. They design a number of strategies whose goal is not to let other people assimilate the trauma: in two-person surveillance teams, they silently follow a selected person; they cut out figures of the disappeared in family photos; stage peaceful demonstrations, engaging in “political theater”, and become “an annoying wild card, popping up at odd intervals to sow confusion and anxiety among law-abiding citizens” (*The Leftovers*, 23). With time, when “[t]he world [goes] back to sleep”, they resort to extreme measures, ordering brutal murders as they believe it is their “duty to wake [the world] up” (*The Leftovers*, 307). The leader thereby uses the trauma to provoke resentment and violence (cf. Volkan 1997).

³ The phrase refers to *Left Behind* (1995–2007) by Tim Lattaye & Jerry B. Jenkins, a popular religious apocalyptic book series that depicts time after the rapture.

The shared and constantly reactivated trauma binds the community, and the traumatic event and post-apocalyptic stress disorder become an inextricable component of their identity. Completely defined by the trauma, the G.R. reject the very idea of working through and allocating the trauma a proper place in their identity; therefore they do not seek closure or the meaning of the event. They refuse to narrativize the traumatic experience as past, and thus instead of chronology, they practice pure duration. The fracture in the continuity of their identity is permanent and the gap between the old and the new reality unbridgeable. As Luckhurst writes, to organize identity around trauma means “to premise it on exactly that which *escapes* the subject, on an absence or a gap” (Luckhurst 2003a: 28, emphasis in original). Rather than suffer from a disturbance of subjectivity as a result of trauma, the G.R. come to create a traumatic identity.

In the novel, the cult’s motivations are revealed through Laurie Garvey’s perspective. Laurie is one of the people who lose their bearings completely after the catastrophe. She abandons her family and joins the G.R. because she feels “she had no choice, because it was the only path that made any sense to her” (*The Leftovers*, 255). She loses her family, friends, and community as well as the security ensured by money because continuing her old life as if nothing happened would be to “pretend that life was good and the world wasn’t broken” (*The Leftovers*, 253). She does not want to repress the trauma, but just the opposite: she needs to acknowledge it and share the sadness and “oppressive gloom” with someone because it feels real, contrary to “the unreality of pretending things were more or less okay, that they’d hit a bump on the road and should just keep going, attending to their duties, uttering their empty phrases, enjoying the simple pleasures that the world kept offering” (*The Leftovers*, 121). She finds the G.R.’s lifestyle appropriate to the state of the world, “a regimen of hardship and humiliation that at least offered you the dignity of feeling like your existence bore some sort of relationship to reality, that you were no longer engaged in a game of make-believe that would consume the rest of your life” (*The Leftovers*, 121). Laurie was a therapist before the Sudden Departure, and while she worked with her patients on improving their relationships, now she thinks friendship and love are “false comforts” so she rejects them to “await the final days without distractions or illusions” (*The Leftovers*, 244). As a therapist, she does not have any answers anymore and dismisses the process of working through – the world has undergone such a profound shift that old answers and meta-narratives are no longer relevant. This is most poignantly reflected in her two suicide attempts in the series. Also, when it is evident to her that Kevin is having a psychotic break, she does not use the old techniques to resolve the crisis. Her conduct suggests that science has become useless at the time of the aftermath: it cannot explain the event, and it cannot help its victims.

The figure of Laurie demonstrates how people's relationship with clock time has changed after the event. Before the disappearance, "when everybody thought the world would last forever" (*The Leftovers*, 303), people did not have time for anything, rushing from one task to another. Laurie was never calm and relaxed, even in her spare time; instead, she always felt "rushed and jittery, as if the last few grains of sand were at the very moment sliding through the narrow waist of an hourglass. Any unforeseen occurrence – road construction, an inexperienced cashier, a missing set of keys – could plunge her into a mood of frantic despair that could poison an entire day" (*The Leftovers*, 304). In the series, this is illustrated in the episode titled "The Garveys at their Best" (S01E09) that shows the events just before the departure and people under, in Paul Virilio's terms, "the dictatorship of speed" (Virilio 1995). Kevin is on his morning run, Laurie makes breakfast before work, Jill prepares for school and Tom gets into a fight. The dynamism of the episode is set in stark contrast to the previous eight episodes of the series, depicting the life After: people in passive positions, standing, sitting or lying, resigned and brooding. Now the clock does not dictate the order of Laurie's days any more – when everything has become unimportant, the only thing to do is to smoke and wait. Laurie's position is representative of the G.R.'s because they accept that, in David Lowenthal's words, the future has come to an end (Lowenthal 1992: 23–35). They are not able to accommodate themselves to the new post-catastrophe time, process the event and move on.

Counter to this, other people wish to move on and resume a normal life, i.e., one organized by clock time and governed by the principles of sequence and succession. They want to exercise the capacity for active forgetting, even without understanding what happened. Like Kevin, many people deem it unhealthy to be "reminded all the time of the terrible and incomprehensible thing that had happened", and they would like to believe that "fun was still possible, that you were more than the sum of what had been taken from you. It was hard to think of giving that up, especially when there was nothing waiting to replace it" (*The Leftovers*, 89, 338). Yet the G.R., as a reminder of the event, constitute an assault on the continuity of social and individual identity. They draw power from picking at incurable wounds. This is why the citizens of Mapleton react with hostility and violence when the G.R. appear at the observance of the third anniversary, and when they deliver mannequin replicas of the departed family members to their houses. The mannequins are meant to stand for the bodies of the disappeared to be buried so that their families would get closure. They provoke diverse reactions, from being carried with veneration to an outburst of violence in which they are burned along with the cult members' houses. The violent reactions "exorcise[] the feelings of frustration and powerlessness that turn into a collective rage as the rupture left no corpse to bury, making mourning and healing an impossible process" (Joseph & Letort 2017: 2).

The G.R. thereby realize their goal of forcing people to remember. Their actions make “a deliberate, politically performative statement” whose purpose is to engender autonomous activity and transform “spectators into protagonists” (Murphy 2016: 111, 114).

6. The Book of Nora

One of the most traumatized characters, for whom the zero event has eliminated chronology, is Nora Durst, who is called “The Woman Who Had Lost Everything” because her husband and two children had departed. She is stuck in the past without the hope of moving forward as she relentlessly circles back to the trauma’s original event, which remains in her conscious memory. Trapped at the stage of acting out, she refuses to accept the finality of the Sudden Departure, so she continues with the same habits and shopping list as before, getting milk and cereal for her children and watching their favourite cartoons. In the series, she is suicidal: she hires prostitutes to shoot her while she wears a bulletproof vest. This is her way of managing pain, which is unlike other people’s expectations of how she should be mourning, so they continue to impose a meaning-making narrative on her loss, explaining it as a “part of God’s plan, or the prelude to a glorious reunion in heaven at some unspecified later date” (*The Leftovers*, 108–109). One priest even attempts to depreciate her pain, saying that her suffering is not unique, especially comparing it with another woman’s who lost her husband and three children in a car accident and still lived “a reasonably happy and productive life” (*The Leftovers*, 109). To Nora, that woman is lucky because at least she knows what happened to her family, while Nora’s own attempts to search for meaning and closure are frustrated by the mystery at the core of the disappearance.

Disabled by her pathological mourning, Nora is arrested in her grief, unable to process her loss and integrate it into her experience or to start new relationships. Despite her attempts at a relationship with Kevin, she cannot commit because she feels emotionally depleted; she has “no love to give Kevin or anyone else, no joy or energy or insight” (*The Leftovers*, 240). When Kevin talks about his son, she only feels “bitterness and envy so strong it was indistinguishable from hatred, a burning, gnawing emptiness in the middle of her chest” (*The Leftovers*, 316). In all their interactions, she is convinced that all her actions are interpreted in light of the trauma; that she is perceived only through her loss. She regards Kevin’s words as “just warm-ups, stand-in for the questions he really wanted to ask: *What happened that night? How did you go on living? What it’s like to be you?*” (*The Leftovers*, 109, emphasis in original).

The novel ends with Nora trying to relinquish her old identity: she changes her name and hair colour and decides to move to another city. However, she finds an abandoned baby on the Garveys' porch and discovers that she is delighted to do so, which becomes a promise of a new beginning. In the series, Nora also finds the baby, yet the need to make sense of the tragedy is still so strong that she makes a desperate decision to go to the parallel universe to which – as the scientists discover – the departed have gone. When she reaches the other universe in a risky experiment, it appears to be a mirror image of her world: in that universe, 98% of the population have disappeared. She sees her family happy with another woman and, feeling like “a ghost who had no place there” (S03E08), she decides not to intrude, but return to her universe. Nora tells this story to Kevin many years later when he finds her living somewhere in Australia. We never see what happens to Nora in the parallel universe, which can be read as a comment on the nature of faith: one does not know anything, one can only choose to believe. As Jesus' followers believed his oral account of the other world, in the episode called “The Book of Nora” Kevin believes her. The denial of the viewer's access to the parallel universe stands for the unrepresentability of trauma. More importantly, Nora's journey to that universe mediates her traumatic memory and reframes her emotions. The result is acceptance, rather than closure. She stops striving to explain the inexplicable and demanding answers and starts living without them. Only then is she finally emotionally prepared to be with Kevin.

7. Where is my mind?

Kevin Garvey is the character for whom trauma has most severely altered the structure of temporality and disorganized his being-in-time, particularly in the HBO adaptation. He survives the catastrophe seemingly unharmed (no one close to him departs), yet a traumatic deferral takes place and the psychological consequences assault him three years after the event. He experiences trauma as Caruth describes it: the original traumatic event is experienced “too unexpectedly”, therefore it eludes consciousness, and if it becomes available, it is only in the form of a “belated impact” as its unassimilated character returns to terrorize a person later on (Caruth 1995: 4, 7, 9).

Kevin's post-apocalyptic stress disorder reveals itself as a subconscious death drive and psychological trauma that has split his being-in-time into a Before and After persona. Trauma literally disables his mind. Depressed and completely numbed to reality, Kevin goes through the daily motions just to survive another day. As an authority figure, he represses his emotions to better enact the prerogative of being efficient. With other policemen, he strives to continue their work of controlling the post-departure chaos and preventing the community from dissolution by observing a temporality based on clock time. Much as he struggles

to preserve the appearance of normalcy by keeping up with his daily routine, his subconscious enacts the ramifications of the violence of the traumatic event. He is a good police officer during the day, but he unravels by night, taking trips he has no recollection of with the mysterious Dean (Michael Gaston), and engaging in acts of violence that seem to be out of character. While consciously he brings himself to the brink of death by auto-asphyxiation with plastic bags, his subconscious desire for the ending is expressed in his multiple attempts to kill himself. The traumatic event thereby explodes his sense of unitary selfhood and he splits into two personalities, yet that split goes beyond the simplistic black and white, good-by-day and bad-by-night pattern. He lives, as a traumatized person does, according to Robert Stolorow, “in another kind of reality, an experiential world incommensurable with those of others” (Stolorow 2007: 20). This incompatibility but also unconsciousness of his own actions result in a sense of estrangement and isolation from other people and from himself. When evidence of his actions seeps in and demolishes Kevin’s hope that he has merely experienced hallucinations, he is shattered. His subconscious and its reaction to trauma are so disturbing and unfamiliar to him that he decides to suppress its work. To that end, he gives up the variety of pills he has been taking, yet this prompts his further emotional unhingement: he discovers that he and Dean have kidnapped the G.R.’s leader, Patti (Ann Dowd), and hold her in the cabin in the woods.

Patti’s death drive is even stronger than Kevin’s, and, propelled by the desire for the ultimate ending and closure, she manipulates Kevin into killing her. She intends to become a martyr to keep reminding people that the world has ended. Later, as a ghost, she tells Kevin that the only moment of happiness in her adult life was when she killed herself because she felt the freedom of it finally being over. Although Kevin does not kill Patti, his guilt over her death manifests itself in the form of a psychotic vision of her ghost that only he can see. The ghost fulfills another role as well: in talking to her, Kevin, in fact, is talking to the repressed parts of himself, working through the traumatic experience.

An even more pronounced manifestation of Kevin’s split into the Before and After personae who struggle to manage the post-departure pain and emotional devastation is his excursion into an alternate reality, a kind of purgatory that exists outside of space and time. Freud describes this function of fantasy, in Butler’s words, as “a psychic process and one related to the repression of traumatic memories. Fantasy constructs were a means of negating or soothing the pain of the past” (Butler 2009: 13). As such, the alternate reality becomes an addictive refuge and Kevin admits: “Each time I’m here, it gets harder and harder to leave” (S03E07). Freud explains this wish of consciousness to sleep and not to wake up by reality possessing something that makes us sleep (Caruth 1996: 97). This something is “precisely reality itself – in other words, the reality principle in opposition to the pleasure principle” (Barnaby 2012: 27).

Governed by the wild non-logic, the alternate reality serves as a locale in which Kevin undertakes various odd missions (dying before each trip, yet his death never appears final). His actions in this realm impact the real world. The purpose of his first trip is to exorcise Patti's ghost from his psyche, while during his last trip he finally confronts the original trauma. This time his consciousness undergoes another split into himself and his twin brother, the President of the U.S. and the leader of the G.R. To accentuate this split, the whole episode is marked by doubles, mirrors, and reflections: two Kevins, two worlds, two books, and two resolutions. The two Kevins struggle with Patti, the Secretary of Defense, who wants them to launch a nuclear attack, indulging her death drive and the society's desire for the ultimate end: "We are going to vaporize every man, woman, child on the planet. We give the people what they are too chicken to do themselves, what they elected us for. We give them what they want. And they want to die" (S03E07). The struggle with Patti's decision simultaneously becomes for Kevin the struggle with two contradictory desires that drive him: to end the world and to stop the end of the world.

Although Kevin's existence on various layers of reality seems to indicate the unravelling of the self, it constitutes a part of the process of working through the traumatic memory. In the romance book that Patti forces him to read aloud, he encounters a metaphorical reflection of his existential problems. Thus he reconstructs his story in the narrative form and reaches a critical judgment, which instigates the resolution of the trauma. He realizes that the failure of his relationship with Nora was partly his fault because he was not able to fully commit to her. He parted with her so as not to be subjected to the terrible vulnerability of allowing himself to be loved by her in return. The post-apocalyptic stress disorder and fear of commitment converge in the question: "How can people attach themselves to one another and allow themselves the vulnerability of being left by the person they care most about when they're living in a world where that person can disappear in an instant?" (Lindelof, after Robinson 2017). Yet this question not only refers to the Sudden Departure but presents itself as an all-time dilemma in every romantic relationship. In this respect, Kevin feels the compulsion to repeat the past. He had a problem with commitment before: he had a loving relationship with Laurie with whom he created a family, and yet he sabotaged it by a random sexual encounter. It transpires that his great life – a great job and a loving family – does not fulfil him. He confesses to his father: "I think something's wrong with me. Why isn't it enough?" His father answers that that is "[b]ecause every man rebels against the idea that this is fucking it", and seeks a greater purpose, yet it does not exist (S01E09).

Kevin thereby realizes his true purpose in the alternate reality is to destroy it so that he could end his self-destructive behaviour, stop avoiding unpleasant truths and live fully in the real world. Through psychological introspection, he confronts his fears and decides to stop running away. Employing reflective

imagery to represent the character, the show literally enacts both a self and an Other embedded in his form. The enemy is thus literally the self. Through the destruction of the other world – the world he has created to hide a part of his heart, of himself – Kevin solves that duality and with it finds a way to live in the time of the aftermath.

As demonstrated above, Kevin's temporality has undergone radical delamination as a result of the trauma. His temporal experience has become disconnected from clock time and from his own linear temporality of being-towards-death. In his case, the effect and work of trauma take the shape of atemporal and disjointed encounters on various temporal planes. His lapse into inner time provides a way to address trauma and anxiety and to connect with the deeper embedded temporalities that exist within him, exposing their cathartic potential. This connection allows him to resolve his issues and take ownership of his own self.

8. The narrative framework

Trauma theory has marked its impact not only on how trauma is understood and conceptualized in the mainstream, particularly American culture, but also on acceptable ways in which it should be represented in fiction. As trauma demolishes a culture's meaning-making strategies and representation modes, many critics deem it to be beyond representation. It has become axiomatic that trauma can only be adequately depicted utilizing radically experimental forms (Craps & Buelens 2008: 5). The most popular techniques include antilinearity, splitting of the narrative voice, decentered subjectivity, fragmentary and repetitive structure, deferral, disjunction (cf. Whitehead 2004: 84–86; Kaplan & Wang 2008: 8–15; Gibbs 2014; Vickroy 2015: 33–65), and representing the trauma as an “absent content” (Eaglestone 2004: 105).⁴

The figuration of time in *The Leftovers* is contingent upon the characters' psychological time and the complexity of their responses to the traumatic experience. Experimenting with narrative temporality, the novel employs most of the typical narrative techniques enumerated above. It is divided into a Prologue (narrated from Lurie's third-person point of view) and five Parts, each of which is split into sections, narrated in the third person from the perspectives of the members of the Garvey family (Laurie, Kevin, Jill, and Tom) and Nora. Within these sections, the events are related in a non-chronological way, providing flashbacks into the past. The polyphony of voices, focalization, and shifts in narrating subjectivity contribute to the portrait of emotional isolation of the characters, suffering from the impact of the apocalyptic event.

⁴ Eaglestone uses the phrase to refer to the representations of the Holocaust in fiction.

The series exhibits a more uninhibited approach to chronology which makes it a case of “temporal displacement”, i.e., the aesthetics of the disturbing linear time, popular in twenty-first-century television (cf. Booth 2011: 370, 371). The show loosens time from the constraints of sequentiality, and reality from its traditional boundaries. It permits time to operate on several inextricably linked planes: reality, Kevin’s mental reality (further differentiated into the plane on which he can see Patti’s ghost and the plane of alternate reality to which he mentally shifts), and a parallel universe to which Nora travels. Season 1 episode 1 starts with the Sudden Departure individually witnessed by various characters, after which there is a cut to the third-anniversary celebration. We follow the lives of various characters three years after the event; however, season 1 episode 9 shows the Garveys’ life before the departure and episode 10 returns to the time of three years after. Season 2 episode 1 turns back the clock to the time of the cave dwellers. A young mother loses everyone in an earthquake and languishes, paralyzed by depression. After some time she sees smoke in the distance and walks in that direction. Bitten by a snake, she soon dies, leaving her baby behind, who is, however, discovered by another woman. This intro constitutes a bridge between seasons 1 and 2 as it refers to the baby – a “miracle child” left on the Garveys’ porch – whom Nora finds at the end of season 1. Season 2 starts with the introduction of the new characters, the Murphys, who live in Miracle, Texas, a town from which nobody departed. Soon the new neighbours move in next door: Kevin, Nora, Jill, and the baby. Episode 2 of season 2 reverts about two months to show what happens from the moment Nora finds the baby to the moment they move to the house in Miracle. In season 2 episode 1 Evie Murphy (Jasmin Savoy Brown) disappears, and season 2 episode 10 shows that ‘disappearance’ again, but this time from her own perspective, then cuts back to the present.

Furthermore, the same repetitive musical score is used throughout the series to refer to the Sudden Departure and enact its compulsive repetition. First, the music constitutes the background of the scene in which the zero event takes place and later on, whenever it is played, it is associated with that event. The tune “not only replaces vacuous words and fills in the blanks of the narrative, but its repeated use generates an aural serial pattern reactivating the initial trauma whenever it is played” (Joseph & Letort 2017: 3). In this manner, music contributes to the representation of the trauma as implicit “absent content”. The absence of the disappeared is rendered tangible also by visual traces, such as cut-out photographs, the mannequins, and a statue of a mother with a child slipping out of her hands.⁵

⁵ In the context of apocalyptic turning points and 9/11, the strategy brings to mind the National September 11 Memorial in New York and its two reflective pools titled “Reflecting Absence”, marking the footprints of the missing World Trade Center towers. The voids with

The formal structure of the show thus mimics the working of trauma and the psyche's constant shifts between the past and the present. The lack of diegetic coherence reflects the psychological state of characters who suffer from the apocalyptic breakdown. The eruptions into the supernatural/fantasy signal "a rupture in the symbolic order. The real can no longer appear directly or be expressed in a conventional realist mode" (Whitehead 2004: 84). On the one hand, then, the series takes advantage of the typical experimental techniques to represent trauma, yet on the other, it amps them up and adds science fiction and supernatural elements to the mix. It is those risky narrative and stylistic choices that make the series unique.

9. Conclusion

After the global catastrophe, the world in the novel and on the show is stuck in a state of anxiety and anticipation of the repetition of the traumatic past. The feeling of security has been lost forever to be replaced by a spectral threat, tension, and stasis. The catastrophe has fractured the sense of continued selfhood and one's own and the society's relationship to time, but also has called into question the meaning of the world itself. The zero event never reveals its whole significance because the ultimate end never materializes, so it is impossible to look back at the totality of things. Because duration without closure remains psychologically intolerable, the characters continue to be deeply scarred and broken, and in the case of the Guilty Remnant, trauma takes over their identity and starts to define them. Post-apocalyptic stress disorder thus manifests itself as a continued existential crisis from which one does not recover, but yearns for the end instead. As the examples of Nora Durst and Kevin Garvey – who after many years find a way to live in the post-catastrophe world – demonstrate, the only answer is to stop looking for answers.

Trauma narratives aim to generate emotional catharsis. They act against medical reductionism by allowing the reader and viewer access to "a voice which is not fully known or knowable" (Whitehead 2004: 8), facilitating understanding and compassion. This stance of a witness can open up the possibility of the transformation of the reader/viewer through identification (Kaplan & Wang 2008: 10). Trauma narratives can also be therapeutic for trauma survivors, proposing strategies of addressing the crisis and helping them to reconfigure negative experiences. Like other fictional trauma narratives, *The Leftovers* serves as an example of cultural practice in which trauma can be acknowledged, negotiated, and reframed.

the waterfall flowing down into the abyss emphasize the absence of the towers, as does an annual installation called the "Tribute in Light", consisting of two vertical columns of searchlights that symbolize the missing towers.

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