

Urban Trauma Between Perceptivity and Sensitivity

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Abstract: This article introduces a conceptual framework for analysing urban trauma at the intersection of trauma studies and emotional/affective geography. It frames urban trauma not merely as the aftermath of past violent events, but as a recurring spatial condition. To capture these dimensions, the study distinguishes between Affective/Synchronic Urban Trauma (ASUT) and Emotional/Diachronic Urban Trauma (EDUT). While ASUT is oriented toward present and future insecurity, EDUT structures violence as a completed historical experience, transforming it into a symbolic resource for collective identity. Furthermore, this framework foregrounds bodily perception, sensory engagement, and emotional navigation in urban space. Applying Michel Foucault's concept of *care of the self*, the analysis demonstrates that encounters with traumatic urban landscapes involve not only remembering historical suffering, but also recognizing it as a potential dimension of one's own existence.

Keywords: urban trauma; collective memory; emotional/affective geography; urban space; perception; care of the self.

Sociology must include a sociology of the perception of the social world, that is, a sociology of the construction of visions of the world which themselves contribute to the construction of this world.

(Bourdieu 1989: 18)

Several characteristics of trauma make it a powerful analytical tool for urban studies. Trauma operates across overlapping temporalities: it encompasses not only the aftermath of past events, but also the lived experience of ongoing insecurity and the anticipation of future harm. Moreover, trauma narratives frequently structure social dynamics by demarcating victims and perpetrators (Adams and Vice 2013; Kurvet-Käosaar 2020) while fostering collective identity around shared vulnerability (Luckhurst 2008). Trauma thus serves both as an interpretive lens for reading reality and as a catalyst for social consolidation.

This study grounds urban trauma at the intersection of trauma studies and emotional/affective geography. Emotional geography has long demonstrated that emotions are socially and politically impactful rather than strictly private psychological states (Anderson and Smith 2001; Davidson et al. 2007). The subsequent affective turn broadened this scope, highlighting the embodied, pre-conscious, and relational dynamics that bind individuals to their spatial environments (Thrift 2004; Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019). Combined, these frameworks reveal how urban spaces become emotionally charged and how experiences of insecurity, care, exclusion, or belonging attach to specific sites.

Since the theoretical foundations of urban trauma have been discussed in detail elsewhere, I will only briefly reiterate the principal elements of the concept of urban trauma (Troitskiy 2026). Urban trauma crystallises within these affective relationships between individuals, collectives, and the built environment. It becomes especially visible in places marked by exclusion, discrimination, environmental degradation, economic decline, or other forms of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011). These sites acquire negative emotional weight through the accumulation of actual or anticipated victimisation. Indeed, repeated exposures to marginalisation create conditions where an entire social group comes to perceive itself as continuously vulnerable.

Although contemporary trauma studies recognise that collective agency can emerge from shared exposure to trauma (Troitskiy, Kurvet-Käosaar and Laineste 2021), scholars regularly debate the potential trivialisation of an expanding trauma discourse (Miller and Tougaw 2002; Davis and Meretoja 2020). Nevertheless, trauma remains a highly productive model for examining how spatial vulnerability intersects with social structure. Extending Maysa Akbar’s (2017) work, urban trauma represents a matrix of social, economic, environmental, and demographic conditions that routinely reproduce everyday oppression. This perspective aligns closely with the concept of chronic urban trauma, which

stresses the cumulative psychological toll of structural inequality and continuous exposure to harm (Pain 2019). Urban trauma is thus best understood not as an anomaly triggered by exceptional events, but as a recurring feature of contemporary urban life.

1. Affective/Synchronic Urban Trauma (ASUT) and Emotional/Diachronic Urban Trauma (EDUT)

The first dimension of urban trauma is what I define as affective/synchronic urban trauma (ASUT). Grounded in persistent uncertainty and anticipated danger, this condition emerges from a contemporary urban condition increasingly saturated by anxiety (Bauman and Donskis 2019). Such unease is sustained by an “unease infrastructure” (Troitskiy and Tsarev 2022)—a network of symbolic signals, media narratives, rumours, surveillance technologies, and daily practices that collectively normalize expectations of threat.

The weight of these signals stems not from their isolated meanings, but from their cumulative intensity. They shape a location’s affective atmosphere, constantly reinforcing perceptions of vulnerability. Urban legends, crime reporting, warning systems, and news cycles continuously circulate this anxiety, maintaining a state of anticipated victimisation (Carrabine 2008; Arkhipova and Kirzyuk 2020).

ASUT is fundamentally affective: it operates through pre-conscious, embodied exposure rather than fully articulated narratives. Because its core characteristic is the persistence of perceived threat rather than a closed historical chapter, it eludes direct representation (Edkins 2011). As Emery (2022) notes, urban trauma is rooted in social geographies where bodies directly navigate ongoing spatial transformations. Consequently, ASUT denotes a sociocultural condition wherein individuals organise their daily routines around the expectation of harm.

Crucially, the recognition of victimhood produces paradoxical effects. While offering social visibility and political legitimacy, it risks flattening individuals into predefined roles—transforming them into symbolic victims within broader political agendas and thereby diminishing their agency (Agamben 1995; Edkins 2011).

By contrast, the second dimension—emotional/diachronic urban trauma (EDUT)—operates not through immediate affective states, but through narration, memorialisation, and social interpretation. EDUT weaves dispersed experiences into coherent storylines, anchoring them to urban space to forge collective identities (Hammack 2010; Hammack and Toolis 2015).

This dimension aligns closely with cultural trauma theory (Alexander et al. 2004; Malinova 2021). Through memory politics and symbolic representation, selected events are elevated into foundational myths of collective suffering. These narratives become materialized in the built environment through a dedicated memorial infrastructure: monuments, museums, commemorative rituals, public holidays, and symbolic landscapes.

Particularly central to this process are *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1984), which act as spatial hubs for identity formation. These sites anchor narratives of suffering to concrete geographic locations, creating a durable bond between memory and space. In multicultural contexts, competing memory communities often overlap, producing contested, multi-layered traumatic geographies.

Where ASUT responds to present or impending threat, EDUT reframes violence as a completed historical milestone. Past wars, repressions, or genocides are reinterpreted as anchors for group solidarity (Edkins 2003; Bell 2006). In practice, the contemporary political utility of these trauma narratives often eclipses the specific details of the original events (Malinova 2021).

Moreover, EDUT carries significant political and economic weight. Traumatic heritage is frequently commercialised via dark tourism (Kidron 2012, 2013), while narratives of collective suffering offer potent tools for political mobilization, boundary-making, and the strategic cultivation of social fear (Robin 2006; Taras 2023).

Ultimately, urban trauma operates through dual mechanisms: ASUT captures the immediate, embodied experience of continuous vulnerability in everyday life, whereas EDUT reflects the mediated, narrativised past integrated into collective memory. Their interplay reveals how urban space functions simultaneously as a site of daily habitation and a contested landscape of memory, fear, and political identity.

2. Perceptivity of Urban Trauma

To operationalize how ASUT and EDUT function in everyday life, we must examine how individuals perceptually navigate space. Understanding urban trauma requires examining the sensory, navigational, and cognitive mechanisms through which spatial threats and memories are decoded.

2.1. Navigation, Mental Maps, and Spatial Infrastructure

Traumatic attitudes affect the configuration of the mental map, life trajectories and strategies of behaviour of the subject. Therefore, the approach to the study of urban trauma, according to Maria Lugones, should take into account the topographic aspect and work with bodily reality (sensations). Lugones entitles it the “pedestrian” approach. It assumes a plurality of Others who need understanding without losing their friendliness. The “pedestrian” view is the “perspective from within people, from within layers of relationships, institutions and practices” (Lugones 2003: 5). A similar approach 100 years before this Argentine philosopher was proposed by the Russian scholar Ivan Mikhailovich Grevs (an excursion approach based on the ideographic method), thinking that the understanding of culture is impossible without sensations, involving all the senses (Grevs 1903, 1910, 1921). However, Grevs, unlike Lugones, offered to comprehend not the living Others in the city, but the city as a whole through its artefacts, trying to understand and hear the previous generations who had already died. Because of this, the city appears as a porous, complex and heterogeneous system that does not fit into the linearity of the temporal view of the construction of a place, but on the contrary, is accessible only to ethnographic hearing, catching fragments of various testimonies, opinions, individual memories (Till 2005). It is not surprising that the excursion approach of Grevs is used to study urban trauma in the meaning of cultural trauma, and the “pedestrian” view of Lugones is used to describe urban trauma as a source of traumatic anxiety.

Memorial infrastructure, often implemented as tourist infrastructure, helps to reduce the traumatic impact and content at the subjective level. At the same time, the attractiveness of the object around which this infrastructure is organised (a place of memory) increases, i.e. the recognition of the object, financial

flows, etc., play a role. In contrast, unease infrastructure promotes the inclusion of a point in space on the mental map, although already unacceptable for aspiration. The conceptualisation of urban space through internal (vernacular) perception, as developed by Kevin Lynch (1960), has allowed researchers to focus not only on object-oriented urbanism but also on subject-oriented spatial linguistics, cognitive/mental maps (Bock 2025), wayfinding (Arthur et al. 1992; Casakin et al. 2000; Liu 2026), and so on. In this context, the subject acts as a guide, bridging the world of objects and internal representations of space, with their interaction being neither unidirectional nor linear (see the results of a study on the interaction between internal and external factors in constructing an emergency route: Vilar et al. 2014). This subject or guide not only systematises representations of the city by receiving information triggered by emotions or affects from specific places (Ekstrom et al. 2018) and by utilising their own “spatial ability” (Linn & Petersen 1985) and “spatial orientation” (Gärling et al. 1986). For Lynch, the emotional marker of a place – Lynch makes no distinction between emotions and affects, because his book was published before the affective turn – is a form of ‘meaning’. ‘Meaning’ is the subject’s internal relationship to a place, to its distinct from, “but quite a different one from, spatial or pattern relations” (Lynch 1960: 8). For Lynch, ‘meaning’ is one of three components of the analysis of the environmental image, alongside ‘identity’ (the character of the place itself, its uniqueness, determined by a unique set of elements) and ‘structure’ (its inclusion in a system alongside other places). These three components enable a place to possess properties such as imageability and legibility (Lynch 1960; Zhu et al. 2026; Taylor 2026).

Individual emotions are gathered into ‘urban wayfinding systems’ (Liu 2026); these systems are replenished with new points through one’s own emotional experiences, the emotions of others associated with specific experiences, as well as those intentionally designed by city authorities, builders, and urban planners. However, the subject or provider also transmits this information to other people, adding to their vernacular space – and to their internal navigation systems – new points and places associated with others’ emotions. More precisely, the significance and power of others’ emotions and emotional experiences give rise to localised personal emotional connections to a place (second-order meanings). In this way, an individual system of spatial preferences is formed (topographic hierarchy, Troitskiy 2019; Troitskiy and Tsarev 2022), a system of individual visual cues (navigational elements, de Jesus 1994), a system of

emotional markers, a system of '*navigational preferences*' (Zomer et al. 2019, original italics), and others. All of this allows us to perceive the city, among other things, as a network of routes along which various individual trajectories are formed (Zomer et al. 2019).

Urban trauma is embedded in all these systems. It becomes visible through visual markers, which serve as indicators of traumatic experience (components of *memorial infrastructure* and the *unease infrastructure*): signs pointing the way to memorials, the memorials themselves, street signs, place names, and the names of institutions associated with traumatic experiences, graffiti, wanted posters, advertisements for psychological assistance, newspaper and magazine front pages displayed in newsstands announcing articles about trauma, and so on. These elements form a system of *navigational preferences*, especially when the route serves an exploratory, commemorative, political, charitable, or other purpose related to trauma. Based on these same objectives, a topographical hierarchy is also formed, that is, a hierarchy of places to which a person aspires to move if they decide to relocate (preferred locations) or, conversely, places they strive to avoid at all costs (places to avoid).

2.2. Dark Tourism and Sensory Exploration of Space

Dark tourism is in great demand. According to the FMI (Future Market Insight) report, last year the global dark tourism market was valued at \$30 billion. Sites of recent tragic events related to the military invasion of Ukraine (Azovstal, Bucha, Irpen) are also considered potential destinations for dark tourism (Zaika 2023).

The "pedestrian" approach to urban space assumes that, in order to explore places and create emotional connections between the individual and the place (the creation of "meanings") (Lynch), the senses – sight, smell, hearing, and touch – are engaged to perceive the corresponding signals emanating from a specific place ("identity" according to Lynch) and the city as a whole ("structure" according to Lynch). Also involved are feelings of fatigue and the muscular tension of the body engaged in the pedestrian exploration of the route, which in this case can be equated with the other senses. At the same time, urban trauma – both ASUT and EDUT – is built on additional channels for obtaining information about a place, namely the traumatic nature of the experience associated with that place and the subject's potential for experiencing a similar traumatic event. The expectation and assumption that a traumatic event could

happen to anyone can also be equated with additional receptors. Thus, “pedestrian” exploration of urban traumas requires the pedestrian to be fully open, both perceptive and receptive.

2.3. Traumatic Displacement: Immigrants and the Hybrid Mapping of Space

The interplay between prior spatial memory and immediate sensory exposure becomes particularly acute in the case of forced mobility. New immigrants demonstrate such sensory openness, serving as a point of connection between their mental maps of their previous place of residence, on the one hand, and, on the other, being forced to construct a new mental map, new routes, and new daily and life trajectories. Their former life, deeply rooted in the place they have left behind, is part of their identity and influences their models of spatial identification, placing a heavy burden on the psyche (Brun 2001). The dialectic of deterritorialisation (Malkki 1992; Massey 1994) and reterritorialisation in the relationship between the individual and space (Brun 2001) resolves the internal conflict of divergent territorialisation processes, which requires resolution through reterritorialised spaces. They are places where past spatial identity (complete and preserved as a finished construct in memory) connects with new spatial identity (unfinished, constantly evolving, and engaging the immigrant’s sensibility) (Brun 2001; Sampson and Gifford 2010), places “where local and transnational membership is interwoven” (Biglin 2020: 2; Turton, 2004; Lambert-Ward, 2014). Despite the emerging urban planning trend of creating “therapeutic spaces” (Gesler 1992, 1993; Bell et al. 2018; Biglin 2020), their positive impact is called into question because, while they serve a therapeutic function for some, they exacerbate existing trauma for others (Pitt 2014; Bell et al. 2018; Conradson 2005). The quality of this impact is determined by a person’s prior psychological experiences (Biglin 2020; Ward-Thompson et al. 2010).

Being an independent actor, the immigrant nonetheless contributes to the formation of urban trauma. ASUT incorporates the immigrant’s own trauma of relocation, compounded by the likelihood that it will be repeated by any resident of the city, and beyond. Immigrants also carry urban traumas from their previous place of residence, which – in the form of spatial frameworks (cultural reputation, markers of vernacular space, stereotypes, and prejudices) –

are transferred to the EDUT of their new location. This process of transfer is also part of the 'culturaband' complex (Troitskiy 2024). For an immigrant, vernacular space is a point of convergence of time (usually the past) and space, which is marked by emotional and affective markers in those places where emotional experiences were most intense. Perceptive ("pedestrian") experience creates such markers in the new place, but the immigrant's past cultural experience, linked to the former space, also contributes to the emotional mapping of the new city. This mapping occurs through an unintentional comparison of the new place with the past, based on visual similarity or a connection to a similar or identical event in history or in the immigrant's personal history. In this way, immigrants form their own unique mix of traumatic constructs of the host city, and this mix is reflected in a distorted form in the collective imagination and urban trauma.

3. Case Study

To illustrate how ASUT and EDUT intersect in public discourse and how historical trauma can be strategically mobilized to evoke present threat, I examine a recent socio-political controversy in Estonia. The examples have been deliberately chosen to deal with the same event, the bombing of Estonian towns. In the first case, the focus is on a potential threat and a simulated event; in the second, on an event that took place a quarter of a century ago, which left a deep mark on the history and collective consciousness of the Estonian people. The example bring trauma to the fore in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Soviet occupation of Estonia is associated with traumatic events, mass deportations of Estonians to Stalinist camps and prisons in Siberia, and repression within Estonia. The memory of these events is preserved in the individual memories of citizens and upheld by society through memorial infrastructure. At the same time, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, it is the destruction of cities that is particularly relevant today.

3.1. Historical Analogy and Propaganda? The Narva 44 Exhibition Leaflet

A scandal, which seems highly telling, erupted in Narva. The scandal was triggered by a promotional leaflet produced for the Narva 44 exhibition (which opened on 6 March 2024), organised by the Narva Museum with the support of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and the Propastop association¹. The exhibition itself featured historical and documentary material on the bombing of Narva in 1944. The promotional leaflets were distributed to residents of Narva. According to the director of the Narva Museum, Maria Smorzhevskikh-Smirnova, the leaflets were produced by the exhibition's co-organiser, the Propastop association, and the museum was not involved in this (Horizont 2024). The leaflets featured two photographs of ruined buildings. The first photo showed a school building in Narva destroyed during the Soviet bombing of 1944. The second photo showed a building in the Ukrainian city of Zhytomyr, destroyed by Russian bombs in 2022. This composition imposed a particular interpretation on the viewer through historical analogy (Kornprobst 2007a, 2007b; Keulen 2023). Despite the heuristic value of certain types of historical analogy, they are often used for propaganda purposes as a fallacy, evoking the desired emotions (MacDonald 2000; Keulen 2023). Evidence that the leaflet's authors deliberately employed a fallacy is provided by the leaflet's headline: "Midagi ei ole muutunud. Venemaa paneb toime sõjakuritegusid igal ajal" (Nothing has changed. Russia commits war crimes in every era).

Some members of the museum's board of trustees criticised the museum director specifically for these leaflets (Stepanov 2024). In fact, this visual material turned out to be a standalone statement with only an indirect connection to the exhibition. The exhibition was used as a pretext to declare a specific socio-political stance through propaganda methods (Okazavshijsja, etc. 2024). This was such a powerful statement that it was not the leaflets that served the exhibition, but the other way round. The leaflets about the exhibition employed the technique of historical analogy. This form of argumentation is frequently employed by Russian propaganda and by Vladimir Putin personally in relation to Ukraine (McGlynn 2020). In the heated debate surrounding these materials, other logical fallacies were frequently employed (examples are in Harlamova 2024; Ivanov 2024; Viltrop 2024).

The discussion took an administrative and legal turn. The Ministry of Culture and the Narva City Administration – which are the founding bodies of the Narva Museum – were drawn into the scandal (Ministry of Culture et al. 2024; Viltrop 2024).

3.2. Post-War Memory, “Nullpunkt”, and the Recoding of Trauma

In the context of my research on urban trauma, this case seems illustrative for several reasons. Most importantly, the conflict that arose demonstrates different approaches to the boundaries between ASUT and EDUT. The creators of the promotional leaflets for the Narva 44 exhibition sought to reframe a specific Estonian historical trauma as a contemporary traumatic event. They employed visualised Historical Analogy. However, in Narva, it was supplemented with text that left no doubt as to the intentions of the creators of the promotional materials for the Narva exhibition. According to critics of this approach, it provoked rejection precisely because it replaced the emotional aspect with an affective one.

Narva has a complex post-war history; the city was destroyed and then, during the Soviet era, rebuilt on the model of other socialist cities rather than restored to its former state. Admittedly, this was a common story for “cities between Szczecin and Narva: destruction during and after the war, combined with massive changes in the urban population caused by deportations, the murder of Jews, war losses, and, finally, postwar immigration” (Hackmann 2008: 105). A complete renewal also took place among the city’s residents, with people from various republics of the USSR arriving in the city. The family history and collective memory of these new Narva residents were not tied to Narva. For many of them, Soviet Narva is that “*memorial zero point*”, or “*nullpunkt*” (Troitskiy 2022: 23–25, original italics), a pre-historical stage of the modern city from which their own history of Narva began. For the overwhelming majority, the bombing and destruction of Narva represent a moment that lies beyond the bounds of their collective memory; thus, it functions for them as ‘post-memory’, a constructed memory embedded within the mythological complex of World War II (in the Soviet version, the Great Patriotic War). The destruction of Narva, meticulously documented by Soviet war correspondents, was used as part of the case against war criminals during the Nuremberg Trials. The official Soviet version was that the city had been destroyed by the

Wehrmacht. For those who arrived in Narva after the destruction, this was the only version available, and it was framed specifically within the narrative of war crimes committed by German forces.

This constructed set of notions about a past that was not personally experienced but was nonetheless significant turned out to be part of the collective historical trauma upon which collective identity was built. Therefore, dismantling these notions proves to be a far more profound process, calling into question perceptions of oneself as part of a community, the legitimacy of that community, and the legality of one's own existence. And, of course, the construct of historical trauma, embedded within the framework of the city's history – albeit in a conventionally 'prehistoric' period (the memorial zero point, *nullpunkt*) – turns out to be that cohesive body of knowledge which is grounded in stereotypes (Lippmann 1922) and protected by a dense network of individual psychological defences (Amodio 2014; Molla 2023; Thị Hiếu 2026). This is precisely why the Narva case did not gain any serious traction, and the request by two deputies to use the Ukrainian theme and a propaganda tactic to promote an exhibition on the Soviet bombing was labelled a "conflict of values" (Viltrop 2024). Indeed, "Die Wiedergeburt Narvas aus den Trümmern des Zweiten Weltkriegs kann je nach Perspektive als wunderbare Aufbauleistung, als Symbol der Sowjetisierung Estlands oder als Parabel auf die Unfähigkeit eines Systems gelesen werden" (The rebirth of Narva from the ruins of World War II can be interpreted, depending on one's perspective, as a marvellous reconstruction effort, as a symbol of the Sovietisation of Estonia, or as a parable of a system's inadequacy) (Brüggeman 2009: 132). The question posed by the two deputies to the museum director was extrapolated in the public sphere to all residents of Narva and raised doubts about the city's Estonian identity (Viltrop 2024). In personal conversations with Narva residents, most stated that they perceived the promotional leaflets as an attempt to manipulate public opinion by juggling interpretations of events that are fundamentally different: Putin's Russia is not the same as Stalin's USSR; the war in Ukraine is not identical to World War II; the methods of waging war, historical conditions, the situation with allies, and the number of casualties are different; other events in Soviet and post-Soviet history unrelated to war are ignored; and so on.

The destruction of Narva in 1944 and the complete demolition of Old Narva during the Soviet era are part of the EDUT complex, which has been memorialised. The memory of this event is preserved, in part, by the state.

The history of the destruction is incorporated into the narrative surrounding each of the remaining old buildings or those preserved as ruins, which serve as sites of memory with corresponding commemorative practices. Different interpretations of this event are also included in the historical narrative. For Narva, the fact of the destruction itself is traumatic, regardless of the cause.

The Narva case demonstrates the following intention: to use EDUT specifically to recode it into a current traumatic event within the temporal mode of the possible. The case shows how a scenario of future trauma is constructed within the mode of possible trauma. Judging by the reaction of Narva residents, there was no emotional follow-through, and it remained merely at the level of a scandal, a trivial propaganda game with historical facts.

4. Discussion. Sensitivity of Urban Trauma and Care of the self?

The human capacity to sense and interpret the built environment turns the individual into a junction of personal and collective experience, bridging the actual and the possible, the sensory and the intelligible. Urban environments are permeated by microspaces whose reading demands acute attentiveness—both to past events and to processes still unfolding in the present. Encounters with these micro-environments require observers to balance sensory openness with a critical awareness of their social and historical weight. Crucially, such heightened receptivity becomes possible because individuals register these spatial experiences as potentially their own: trauma encountered in urban space, even when historically or socially distant, enters the observer's horizon of self-understanding. Building upon these empirical and theoretical dimensions, we can now address how sensory receptivity connects to the subjective ethics of space.

4.1. Giving Voice to “Missing Persons”: Victimhood in the Urban Space

In her book, Jenny Edkins (2011) writes about the need to bring “missing persons” back from oblivion and neglect so that they can regain their subjectivity or agency (“person-as-such”), even if they are unable to exercise it in the future.

Edkins points to the necessity of such a recovery both in a synchronic sense (for example, “the missing missing/the doubly missing” or “those invisible to our (post)colonial gaze”) and in a diachronic sense (for example, those who went missing during the war). The book aims to become the voice of the missing, the voice of the silent victims. Urban trauma fulfils this task not by personalising each victim, but by providing each of them with a space of memory for personalisation. In contrast to Jenny Edkins’ narrow focus on the missing alone, urban trauma embodies the impossibility of forgetting the traumatic event itself by anchoring the trauma within the urban environment. The modality of possibility, as a temporal regime within trauma, places the non-victim within the space of victimhood. Victimhood blurs the boundaries between the actual victim and the potential victim. In the context of urban trauma, a potential victim’s self-care is self-care as an actual victim.

4.2. Foucault and Hadot: Care of the Self and Cosmic Universalization

Michel Foucault’s concept of *care of the self* offers a powerful framework for deciphering this receptivity. Engagement with urban traces of suffering entails more than recognizing another’s pain; it initiates a reflexive encounter where subjects map encountered spatial meanings onto their own vulnerabilities, memories, and possible futures.

My point is that both interpretations of urban trauma converge in its interpretation as “care of the self” (Foucault 1998), realised as a silent (unheard) Other. In the first case, these are silent living victims instead of whom potential victims should speak, and in the second case, these are silent victims for whom descendants or other members of collective subjects should speak about the traumatic experience. The term “the care of the self” is attributed to Michel Foucault. He does indeed highlight the care of the self as a practice of the self – as an exercise in self-construction – in the third volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* (1984) and in other later works (Foucault 1994). The rather loose and non-specific interpretation of care in his writings leaves ample room for reinterpretation and criticism. For Foucault, “care of the self” precedes care for others, but in the sense that it serves as an exercise in caring for oneself. In one of his last interviews, he states that knowing one’s own capabilities

and limitations, knowing what it means to be and how to be together with the Other, “if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others” (Foucault 1997: 288). “Care of the self” is not conceived as care for an abstract self; the ‘I’ is always embedded in a network of roles, functions, and tasks, “and in promoting our own individual virtues we are thereby enhancing our connection to the community and to others” (White 2014: 498). In this sense, the understanding of the subject/object of care lies somewhere between the classical humanistic and the posthumanistic. However, an understanding of the boundaries of one’s roles, functions, and tasks allows a person to transcend these boundaries and resist the entire mechanism of relationships, for example, through *parrhesia* (“telling the truth”) (Foucault 2019; Fujita, 2008) or Christian self-denial (Foucault 1997: 284–285).

At the same time, Pierre Hadot, an authoritative historian of ancient philosophy and a contemporary of Michel Foucault – whom Foucault cites when describing ancient authors – criticises Foucault for failing to sufficiently develop the concept of self-care (Hadot 1981: 323–332; Montanari 2009). Pierre Hadot points out that, for classical authors, “care of the self” is not limited solely to the physical (technical) aspect of the exercises; otherwise, it would be no different from physical gymnastics or mental gymnastics (in the title of the corresponding chapter in English, Hadot uses “the cultivation of the self”, but not the care of the self (Hadot 1995: 206). The care of the self implies going beyond oneself through these exercises. One’s belonging to the Universe allows one to transcend human boundaries, identify with the Other, and universalise one’s experience: “This implies a radical transformation of perspective, and contains a universalist, cosmic dimension, upon which, it seems to me, M. Foucault did not sufficiently insist. Interiorization is a going beyond oneself; it is universalization.” (Hadot, 1981: 330)

It is precisely this kind of universalisation in the care of the self that we find in urban trauma and, probably, in any transpersonal trauma. In this sense, the speaking subject and the acting agent in the context of urban trauma make this leap across the personal boundaries that hold the silent victims captive. This overcoming is embodied in the act of speaking and writing. Hadot refers to the article “L’écriture de soi” by Michel Foucault (1983), based on St. Anthony’s text regarding “the therapeutic value of writing”. According to Hadot, ready-made narrative constructs and formulas are accepted by the subject to the extent that

they are suitable for describing subjective experiences that already exist within the subject (Hadot 1981: 327–329).

4.3. Institutionalization of Trauma: Rituals, Body Habits, and Emotion Management

The traumatic narrative can be reduced to the expression ‘never again’, to avoiding repetition of the traumatic experience, and in the perspective of care of the self not only to ensure one’s own safety, but rather, to overcome individual corporeality by transferring the universalisation of experience. The infrastructure of urban trauma, both as a *memorial infrastructure* and *unease infrastructure*, allows power to maintain the activity of traumatic effects on subjects. This result is achieved through rituals and narrative practices (Spelman 2008). The objects of urban trauma infrastructure are endowed with an identitarian content, which can change, but at the same time retains a traumatic basis, a ‘ghost’ of the trauma (Hetherington and Degen 2001; Till 2005: 5–24). Changes in the interpretation of urban trauma are primarily associated with the transformation of individual memory(s), or rather, with how the traumatic experience is reactualised in the story every time. This story connects the past and the future of the victim of trauma (Antze 1996).

Emma Janette Rowland, referring to Hochschild’s concept of emotion management (Hochschild 1979), points out three aspects that can be called strategies for working with emotions: “*cognitive*, actors think about how they ought to feel and change their feelings appropriately, *embodied*, the actor attempts to control the physical responses to emotion and, *expressive*, adopting facial expressions to change internal feelings” (Rowland 2014: 49, original italics). The *expressive strategy* is based on the mechanical habituation of the body to emotion in order to extract a deep emotion from external expression. It seems to me that such a strategy is also applicable to traumatic rituals that accustom the body to the appropriate emotional response to stimuli (see Johnson et al. 1995). This is probably the secret of treating post-traumatic stress disorder with the help of archaic rituals (Schultz and Weisæth 2015; Cole 2004). For the same purpose of becoming accustomed to appropriate emotion, ritual is also used as traumatic infrastructure (Sodaro 2018; Kirschenbaum 2006). However, behavioural habits also contribute to the preservation of traumatic experiences and are also passed on from one generation to the next.

5. Conclusion

Urban trauma and its underlying infrastructure are anchored in vernacular spatial practices. Traces of emotional and affective readings of space do not merely recall past experiences—they actively facilitate their circulation. When urban environments preserve these traces, trauma becomes deeply embedded not only at a semantic level, but within the pragmatics of everyday life.

Sensory receptivity and interpretive capacity converge within the human body, turning it into a site of articulation where personal, collective, affective, and cognitive registers intersect. In this process, the body operates as an engine for emotional production and affective transmission, with trauma occupying a pivotal role.

Because urban space is saturated with markers of historical suffering, these traces are frequently decoded as signals of potential threat to oneself. Consequently, the traumatic experience of the Other acquires a heightened affective intensity. Urban trauma can thus be understood as an interpretive construct rooted in memories of events the subject never personally experienced, yet envisions as potential dimensions of their own biography. Ultimately, immersing oneself in these multi-temporal layers of urban trauma resonates with Michel Foucault's notion of *care of the self*—a reflexive practice through which the subject engages spatial traces of suffering to navigate their own vulnerability, identity, and existential horizons.

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Notes

¹ “Propastop is an independent blog. It is run by volunteers, of whom many belong to the Estonian Defence League”; it “works under the Ministry of Defence and is part of the Estonian defence force”. The website declares, “It should be noted that propastop.org does not engage in creating propaganda. It restricts

itself only to exposing propaganda”. (Propastop. What is Propastop? <https://www.propastop.org/en/en-about/>). The blog’s contributors are anonymous, with the exception of its leader, the marketing specialist Andres Lember. The website states that Propastop exists solely as a blog. However, it acts as a key influencer in public opinion and maintains an active presence in the media.

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