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Toward a Contextual Pedagogy of Pain

Trigger Warnings and the Value of Sometimes Feeling Really, Really Bad

THE DEBATE ABOUT trigger warnings has spread all over the Internet and in academic contexts, especially in the United States during the last few years. In short, trigger warnings try to give a heads-up to viewers and readers about media content depicting e.g., violence, self-harming behavior or other potentially disturbing content so that they know to either avoid it or knowingly take the risk of getting "triggered" into post-traumatic stress, anxiety or not feeling safe. Typically, before an online clip or an article, one might include a text such as: "Trigger warning for sexual violence/suicide/racist hate speech/transphobia/eating disorders/fat shaming," or anything else that can cause distress to someone with traumatic experiences. On one hand, trigger warnings have been seen as protection for vulnerable groups, a needed attempt to try to provide a safe space for those living with trauma or societal stigma (e.g., Dalton 2014; Johnston 2014; "Make Me a Sammich" 2014; Häggdahl and Eriksson 2015). On the other hand, they have been seen as extensions of a neoliberal culture of overprotection, excessive self-involvement, and celebration of victimhood that does said victims no favor, or can even enforce the trauma they are meant to protect from (e.g., Bianco 2014; Freeman et al. 2014; Halberstam 2014; Westerstrand 2015).

The debate has now ended up in a kind of a stalemate where the polar-

ization between the proponents and critics of trigger warnings is grow-ing stronger, the stakes are becoming higher, and big (verbal) guns are being drawn. Both sides are blaming the "other" side for bad things. Those that are pro-trigger warnings blame the anti-trigger warning camp for not caring if students, readers, and viewers are put in harm's way. They claim that trigger warnings give people the right to make choices about their cultural consumption and keep them from being (re-) traumatized in spaces where they should have the right to feel relatively safe. Those against trigger warnings blame the proponents for infan-tilizing themselves, pathologizing the reading practices of already mar-ginalized groups, and ignoring their capacity to read and view critically. They argue that trigger warnings repress discussions and representations of difficult and hurtful matters, and that their advocates misunderstand how trauma functions and how it can and cannot be treated effectively.

Context: The Boring Necessity

Does this remind you of any other highly polarized and charged debates in the history of feminism and sexuality studies? What immediately springs to my mind are the now notorious "sex wars" between anti- and pro-pornography camps (e.g., Duggan and Hunter 2006). Just like with that debate, it will probably take some time to actually see where this is going and all the things it connects to. Just like that debate, this one has originated specifically in the American context but is largely dis-cussed as a universal matter. Whether or how it spreads to Europe and the Nordic countries, in what form and to what degree, remains yet to be seen (the public discussion has recently started in Sweden with e.g., Häggdahl and Eriksson 2015; Martinsson and de los Reyes 2015; Westerstrand 2015). And just like so many intelligent retrospective analyses of the pornography debate (see e.g., Attwood 2002; Paasonen 2007; McNair 2014), I will now argue for a similar, perhaps boring and not-polemical-enough, but in my view direly needed move in relation to trigger warnings: that we need more careful *contextualization*, instead of simplistic against-or-for approaches. In other words, I am calling for analyses of how exactly trigger warnings are being used and misused in

various situations, not only what they do "in general."

Firstly, it seems to me that a part of the discussion concerns academic classrooms, practices of critical pedagogy, and the concerns about what it means to spread institutional demands to not only warn for potentially triggering content, but also to excuse students from being required to engage with it. In this case, a key problem is what counts as potentially triggering content and what the expected consequences of such engagement are (e.g., Freeman et al. 2014). Secondly, an interconnected, but in important ways also separate, discussion concerns trigger warnings in online environments like blog posts, videos, discussion boards, and fan fiction, where warning labels are regularly used to signal care, concern for others' feelings, and safety in that environment and community cohesion in spaces where reading or viewing is never an institutional requirement but a voluntary act (see e.g., Stasi forthcoming).

Teaching Potentially Disturbing Content

My own research participates in discussions in feminist and queer media theory on how to understand the involuntary, visceral, and highly charged grip that media images or other cultural products can have on us, in both pleasurable and disturbing ways (e.g., MacCormack 2000; Sobchack 2004; Paasonen 2007). Focusing on how our bodies and sexualities take shape in relation to media content and use, I have long been interested in the ethical and transformative potential of so-called negative affect, such as disgust and shame, and visceral reactions that feel "beyond one's control." These research interests have also shaped my teaching in important ways, and vice versa.

Such interests and focuses, however, have lead to a situation where, if I was teaching in the United States, I could very well be a prime candidate for lawsuits about teaching triggering content. While protected in a way by the fact that my courses have taken place in Sweden and Finland, the trigger warning debate hits close to home. I have very purposefully taught many courses where potentially disturbing media material and discussions around it have formed the backbone of it all, and the discussions and readings have addressed that material and its topics through

feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories. I will most probably continue to do so, because my experiences have been very encouraging. I have taught pornography, and the discussions around it have been invariably astonishing in terms of student engagement, insight, and willingness to reflect on how sex and sexuality are audiovisually inscribed in our bodies. I have taught feminist and queer fat studies with the film *Female Trouble* (1974, USA, dir. John Waters), which includes a great variation of bodies, desires and fetishes, nudity, sexual and other violence, as well as incest, and even if students have said it was the most horrible thing they ever watched, they still saw its value as material to reflect upon. Needless to say, my purpose has not been to traumatize students, but to have them reflect on their bodily gut reactions, as well as intellectual and analytical practices in an environment that is encouraging of and as safe as can be for such reflection.

Just recently I taught a course in Turku (Åbo), Finland on theorizing media attachments and the body, and included trigger warnings – not as warnings about course content, but as a topic on the syllabus. The students read a bunch of blog texts for and against trigger warnings, as well as the main points of an empirical study by Martin Barker and research group (2007) on audience reactions to four films that were censored in the United Kingdom due to sexually violent content. We watched one of those films in class, namely *À ma soeur!* (*Fat Girl*, France, 2001, dir. Catherine Breillat) which includes scenes of (hetero)sexual male-on-female violence and abuse, but also emotional abuse between young women. The students were asked to compare their own reactions to those of Barker and his group's respondents, as well as to form an opinion on whether or what trigger warnings should be given in relation to the film.

The majority of the twenty-odd students, about a third of them non-Finnish, had not heard of trigger warnings before. They seemed quite firmly to be of the opinion that this is some American thing that has little to do with their needs or reading practices. Most of them voiced views that the film was extremely discomforting to watch but that was exactly how it should be from a feminist perspective. The film's rape scene, the scene that is its most hotly debated feature, censored in the

film's theatrical and DVD release in some countries, was in fact not its most disturbing element for many of them, but the more subtle sexual and emotional abuse elsewhere in the film. We viewed the rape scene separately in class, and students were not required watch it. They were, however, required to reflect on what kind of a political or ethical engagement a refusal to watch could and could not be.

None of the students took the opportunity to not watch, or no one ever admitted to closing their eyes. Instead, we had a long, intense discussion on the potential value of discomfort and anger in engaging with controversial media content. The comparisons with other viewers' reactions in empirical research made it easier to look at affective reactions as both personal and culturally shared, and avoid the trap of elevating singular personal experiences to anecdotal evidence of how the "general audience" perceived the film. An important observation came up in class, that the refusal to watch is sometimes already a form of becoming deeply impacted by the image – although not by it *per se* but by one's fantasy of it, possibly worse than what actual viewing would be. In queer film theorist Patricia MacCormack's words:

> Even if the eyes are shut, the body is reacting [...]. All reactions to the visual depiction of perversity are perverse, whether they are consenting with the image or in conflict with it. (MacCormack 2000, 140)

Another example, on a course in postcolonial media studies I taught in Cinema Studies at Stockholm University, I showed a documentary called *Standard Operating Procedure* (USA, 2008, dir. Errol Morris) on sexual torture of male prisoners by US male and female military officers, and the documentation of that torture through photographs in the Abu Ghraib prison. This was a few years ago, before the trigger warning discourse really hit the shore. I was genuinely concerned beforehand about possible student reactions, both in the light of my own strong reactions to the film, and since I did not know how "close to home" the film could hit some students, them being of varying cultural, religious, and geographical backgrounds from all around Europe, Middle East, and

East Asia to Canada and South America, as well as of varying genders and sexualities. The film was accompanied with several debate articles to be read beforehand, and I had purposefully set for it to be viewed toward the end of the course when I felt we had had time to establish trust in the classroom. The subject matter was obviously horrifying, but an issue much debated at the time, and I felt the ethical and political obligation to take it up on a course like this. I warned my students in advance about the potentially upsetting nature of the documentary and gave the possibility to not watch or leave the viewing, if anyone felt too uncomfortable. No one took this opportunity, not once during the three years I taught the course.

Once, however, a student asked a question anonymously in the course feedback, which left me thinking long and hard (in fact, I am still thinking). They asked why I warned them and gave them the chance to skip the viewing of this particular film, when we had also watched some comedies and adventure and romance films whose perhaps more insidious racism and sexism became quite obvious too – but they required no warning since they were perceived as "only entertainment"? Indeed, why would they be less harmful? Did I trust the students' judgment so little that I did not think they could evaluate their own capacity to watch or not watch without overprotective, and thus implicitly condescending, warnings? After all, they were all taking the class voluntarily. In retrospect, I am still wondering if I did the right thing or not to include a "trigger warning," although not by that name. Did it help maintain a safe learning space for the students, or did I just end up babying them? Did I help produce a student mentality where the position of the victim/taker of offense is the position that warrants most attention and empathy? Or did I encourage sensitivity toward one's own and others' unpredictable reactions?

Genealogies of Pleasure and Danger

It is sometimes easy to forget that trigger warnings have already been here for a long time, just by other names, like film classification, age ratings, and content labels (see e.g., Dalton 2014; Stasi forthcoming). The practice of adding warning labels to consumer products began in the

United States already in 1938 and has since spread from food, alcohol, and tobacco to cultural products (Souza 2014). These labels and ratings seem, just like trigger warnings, to concern only relatively easily identifiable things like (presumably) harmful substances, physical violence, eating disorders, nudity, and profane language but not (and how could they) finer structures of oppression or marginalization addressed, maintained or produced.

We have good reason to ask what the addition of the language of triggering brings about specifically and what remains from the past. "Triggers" seem to act performatively, not only describing but also producing audiences as ready to be mentally shot down and shattered. On the other hand, it seems to me that those demanding trigger warnings are not helpless or on the verge of psychological crumbling, but able to voice their wishes and needs loud and clear. For sure, a certain consumer mentality seems to have stuck from warning labels to trigger warnings, that people are entitled to know the content and the risks involved in what they consume, which is an important aspect of limiting (corporate) power to sell and promote whatever, in whichever way, but then the other side is a sometimes outrageous refusal of reasonable personal responsibility for practices of consumption.

The student's feedback comment also connects to the history of feminist film theorizing on the ideological dangers of visual pleasure and the spectator's proximity to images. For example, in the 1980s Mary Ann Doane (1982) interrogated the ways Hollywood cinema constructs the female body as an idealized and pleasurable spectacle, which lures in the female spectator. According to Doane, this spectacular image draws the spectator "too close" and she has no choice but to overidentify with the image, i.e., to become it or reject it – a structure which trigger warnings seem to return to. Feminist psychoanalytical film theory sees such a treacherous proximity as produced primarily through *pleasure* and heightened filmic fantasies, while the content that trigger warnings accompany often directly addresses potentially disturbing issues. Indeed, there has been a time when feminist, LGBTQ, and postcolonial scholars have been much more worried about the treacherousness of pleasure

than about pain and hurt. Perhaps the most (in)famous feminist film theorist of the time, Laura Mulvey (1975), demanded visual pleasure to be destroyed. Why, then, should content that explicitly addresses disturbing things or content that makes you "feel bad," be categorically perceived as more politically suspect than so-called feel-good, easy-to-shake-off content?

Early feminist psychoanalytical film theory has since been criticized for, among other things, its heteronormativity, racial and class bias, and totalitarianism without space for subversion. However, in relation to trigger warnings, the key criticism is that it assumed a recognizable and stable similarity between the spectator and the image to be a prerequisite for the "suction" into the image. The demand for trigger warning does seem to fall into the same trap; it seems impossible to preempt the possibility of traumatic or anxious reactions, since those reactions do not only come about through recognition of some simple similarity, like rape victim seeing a depiction of rape or an eating disordered person seeing a body marked as eating disordered. While personal triggers for those suffering of post-traumatic stress disorder can be highly random and unpredictable (e.g., Freeman et al. 2014), I would claim that images and signs often become *collectively* seen, recognized, and *experienced* as traumatizing, disturbing or offensive only through their circulation and repetitive framing as such (see Ahmed 2004). This is not to say that the experiences would not be real, deeply felt, and worthy of taking seriously. But it does raise some uncomfortable questions about the degree to which the very discourse of triggering might *produce* dramatic viewer reactions, figures of (potentially) traumatized audiences, and certain kinds of imagery as spectacularly dangerous – especially when comparing the things I am reading and hearing from many US universities with my rather easy experiences of teaching potentially disturbing material to partly international but mainly Finnish and Swedish students.

On Safe Space

A recurring figure worthy of more attention in the trigger warnings discussion is that of a "safe space" (see e.g., Ryberg 2012). This figure has

been central in the recent Swedish debate on whether students should be able to question the syllabus (in gender studies classes) and be warned of or have the possibility to not read canonical feminist texts from the past that are perceived as, for example, transphobic or racist (Häggdahl and Eriksson 2015; Westerstrand 2015). The anti-trigger warning side of the debate claims that trigger warnings will make students ill-equipped to face the world full of offense and brutality (Westerstrand 2015). The pro-trigger warning side emphasizes that shared attempts to create safe spaces are needed to foster activism, which can face and change that world of harshness, and points out that the privileged cannot be in charge of deciding what counts as safe (Häggdahl and Eriksson 2015; see also Martinsson and de los Reyes 2015).

Ironically, the demand to implement trigger warnings is often, as it is in this case too, directed at those who are *already expected to care,* and expected to want the same thing as the ones making the demands: to produce feminist futures where sexism, heterosexism, racism, transphobia, and ableism would cease to exist. Only the vision of the routes that have to be taken is different, whether what is needed for change is safe space or space of discomfort. Trigger warnings do not seem to be required from, say, political racist and anti-immigration parties whose power is growing as we speak all across Europe; nor from evolutionary biologists who claim that societal hierarchies between men and women are a natural and unchangeable result of evolution; nor from conservatives expressing homophobic and transphobic views as matters of conscience, not of human rights. This, I assume, is due to the simple reason that no one even expects them to give a damn. Trigger warnings are asked of feminist teachers and partners in struggle, of those that should care for each other, and who do care enough to engage in discussion, as the debate shows. Trigger warnings are also opposed by feminist teachers and partners in struggle, who ask us to not stop engaging, even if the road gets rough and makes us sometimes feel really, really bad. This, I think, is worth remembering.

In her book *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed (2006, 134–5, 154) talks about spaces of comfort and discomfort. In spaces that feel com-

fortable, the boundaries between bodies and the world fade away and one fits in easily, sinks into an expanding space, which produces a homey feeling. In discomfort, one stands out and feels "out of place," becomes disoriented and remains in the margins floating, which in turn demands reorientation and, according to Ahmed, can open up new worlds much more effectively than comfort, or happiness which she critically discusses elsewhere (2010). Here, I believe it is important to distinguish between the productive space of discomfort, the space of productive feminist anger, which should not be seen as aimless aggression but simply a healthy reaction to injustices, and the space of anxiety and fear that can be a radically debilitating vacuum (Ahmed 2004). This relates to the point that most opponents of trigger warnings make too, that personal or collective trauma cannot be treated effectively through avoidance and seeking maximum comfort, quite the opposite – avoidance can and is likely to strengthen the trauma (Bianco 2014; Halberstam 2014). On the other hand, some advocates (or negotiated views) of trigger warnings point out that the aim is not to have an excuse to ignore or reject disturbing material or discomfort overall, but to offer the possibility to knowledgeably engage on one's own terms, and to give the choice to also not engage or engage in one's own time in this world where we are already likely to daily encounter texts and images we wish we never had to read or see (see e.g., Cecire 2014; Dalton 2014). So where on the axes of discomfort, anger, and anxiety do the various incarnations of the trigger warnings debate move at the moment?

One key issue that the opponents of trigger warnings have blamed the advocates for is an emphasis on interiority and the personal; self-involvement that the neoliberal cultural ethos encourages, which shows for example in prioritizing one's own potential discomfort before other people's possibly very different ways of engaging (e.g., Halberstam 2014; Westerstrand 2015). To rephrase, a safe space in this case would be measurable by personal, not necessarily shared, feelings of comfort or discomfort. However, the opposition has equally been accused of promoting a culture of neoliberal individualism, as they call for individual responsibility for being able to cope with offensive or disturbing texts

and images (Cecire 2014; Stasi forthcoming). If you find yourself unable to take a critical distance and "shake it off," it is your own fault for not having learned enough tools to deal, or having lead a too protected life, or using your disability or subordinated position as an excuse for intellectual laziness. Now, how can we not ignore the personal and the traumatic, but direct them toward politics instead of self-involvement or remaining stuck in one's injury? To conclude, I would like to briefly return to the pedagogical value of pain and self-reflection, by addressing their turning into anger instead of complaint.

Anger

How many scholars use their anger, pain, and taking offence as the engines to do research? I know I am not the only one, especially in the genre of feminists and queers. I have chosen to largely conduct research that should, by any account, be extremely "triggering" to me. I wrote my doctoral dissertation in media studies on the ways in which media images of fat gendered bodies aim to engage viewers affectively, and used autoethnography, my own viewing experiences as research material. As a recovering bulimic, I watched endless hours of fat women and men being bullied into believing they are only worth something if they lose weight through atrocious diets. I felt I deeply recognized the anxiety over gender, sexuality, and "wrongfully" directed desires that all seemed entangled in the need for the body to fit in, even though I was not fat and had never shared that experience of structural subordination. But I grew angrier and more distressed by the minute, not least because I could feel how these reality television shows also appealed to me, no matter how hard and how thoroughly I dissected their strategies of producing pleasure. I was forced to face both my privilege and my trauma, when working simultaneously to suppress my bulimic impulses evoked by the material, and working through the ways in which my reactions were partly a product of my personal history, partly a product of audiovisual techniques, and partly about how viewer reactions are situated in wider cultural contexts of how bodies are valued and measured through gender, sexuality, and size intelligibility.

But in the end, the research process was immensely therapeutic. Through repetitive engagement with material I knew to be offensive and trauma-evoking, I actually managed to turn my anger, shame and, yes, pleasure too, into something productive: a book I felt passionately about, as well as personal recovery and a gradual change in my gut reactions toward variations and instabilities in my own body as well as bodies of others. Indeed, the moments of feeling bad – and especially the moments of feeling so bad it was almost unbearable – were also those that prompted the most intense need to work through them, reflect on their cultural background, and shared ethical repercussions (Kyrölä 2014, 140–55). This same tendency is what I have also noticed in my students, as addressed above; that being jolted out of one's comfort zone can open up new worlds. As Audre Lorde points out in her essay "Uses of Anger" (1984), especially women, and other marginalized groups, are taught to fear or feel guilt when facing injustices, rather than to have the appropriate and productive reaction of anger. Lorde (1984, 132) reflects on how her anger toward racism, and racism among feminists, is often heard as a claim to the "moral authority of suffering," rather than fury. However, as she formulates it, "my anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival." Following Lorde's cues, the demands for trigger warnings can be seen as an expression of anger toward a culture which claims to offer safety for marginalized groups but just does not deliver. However, the avoidance of pain and the claims to unbearable suffering can prohibit change from happening, "[f]or anger […] births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth" (Lorde 1984, 131). Sometimes one just needs to feel really, really bad first before smaller and bigger, personal and collective revolutions start happening.

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