The question of the capacity of images to bear witness to trauma has a long history within Western thought, but has been particularly prominent since the Holocaust. The growth of Holocaust literature during the 1980s gave rise to the field of trauma studies, which sought to investigate the capacity of cultural representations to adequately convey and bear witness to the experience of survivors of traumatic experiences, of which the Holocaust is the modern exemplar. However, both trauma studies and visual theory in general have exhibited a deep-seated suspicion of the capacity of images to bear witness to traumatic experience. The editors of this collection of essays assert that: ‘[t]rauma studies consistently return to an iconoclastic notion of the traumatic event as that which simultaneously demands urgent representation but shatters all potential frames of comprehension and reference.’ (p.3)

Martin Jay argues that modern Western thought is marked by a mingled fascination with and denigration of the image and the faculty of sight in general, which reaches its zenith with the advent of poststructuralism. It has become standard practice when discussing imagery, and particularly the imagery of catastrophe or trauma, to signal the image’s insufficiency, its inability to adequately represent the traumatic experience. Nonetheless, as W.J.T Mitchell has demonstrated, this suspicion of the mimetic function of the image is complicated by the persistence of an archaic belief in the image’s capacity to re-present its referent, to make it present as absence. This persistent belief is evident in our tendency to equate the images of a catastrophe such as the September 11th attacks with the attacks themselves, in the same way as our ancestors equated an icon of a deity with the presence of the deity itself.

In their introduction, the editors cite the angry response to the photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz as exemplifying the perceived inadequacy of the image to represent trauma. These photographs showed both too much – in that they were felt to strip the depicted victims of their dignity – and too little, in that they failed to adequately capture the horror of their experience. Oral and written testimony became the default mode of bearing witness to the experience of the Holocaust. This grew partly from the longstanding tradition of witness-narration (e.g. in judicial or psychoanalytic contexts), and partly from the belief that verbal communication, through speech or text, is closer to the body than (photographic) imagery, and so at once more subjective and more authentic.

The most important visual documents of Holocaust witnessing are Alan Resnais’ Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog) of 1955, and Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah, made in 1985. The former serves as an exemplar of the capacity of imagery to witness, the latter of our persistent belief in its inadequacy for the purpose. Whereas Resnais controversially used archive footage in his film, Lanzmann rejected it in favour of a combination of ‘talking head’-style witness narration, and imagery of the survivors revisiting the sites of their trauma in the present day. Lanzmann’s feeling that images were inadequate to the representation of the horror of the Shoah, and that their use could only domesticate its horror, has been the guiding principle for much of the research done in trauma studies since. However, over the past twenty years imagery of the Holocaust has gradually become more widespread within cultural representations, to the extent that there can now be said to be a ‘canon’ of images which are used again and again in representing the Holocaust, such that they have become almost clichés. This would seem to bear out Lanzmann’s suspicion of imagery in relation to the Holocaust.
The book is intended as a rejoinder to the perceived hostility of orthodox trauma studies toward the image, and an attempt to reinstate the image as capable of participation in the process of witnessing which is closely connected with the representation of traumatic events. The editors contend that too much attention has been paid to the mimetic function of the image and its inadequacy that is felt in the face of events that are ‘beyond representation’ (although not beyond narration). The essays in the collection seek to reorient attention from the constative to the performative function of images. In doing so, they recall Mitchell’s assertion that images have a kind of agency, inasmuch as they can be said to ‘want’ to show us things. They seek to focus on the uses to which images are put rather than their status as evidence, and to locate them within specific historical contexts rather than calling on some essentialised ‘power of the image’ which is the root of both iconography and iconoclasm. As such they hope to ‘locate the specific ways that the material image enables particular forms of agency in relation to various historical traumas across the globe.’ (p. 4).

The editors of the collection contend that the performative function of the image allows it to bear witness to the experience of trauma, and as such to not merely depict the world but to assist in its transformation. This ethical dimension is at the heart of the process of witnessing as formulated by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their influential book Testimony, which is a sort of ur-text for the essays collected here. According to Felman and Laub, the mind blocks the subject from actually experiencing the traumatic event. Testimony involves both survivor-witness and listener-witness experiencing the traumatic event as if for the first time; truth is therefore produced rather than related in testimony. The listener-witness assumes an ethical responsibility to ‘perpetuate the imperative to bear witness […] for the sake of collective memory.’ (p. 11). The image participates in the process of witnessing through its capacity to re-present the event as absence, thus respecting the singularity of the survivor’s experience whilst allowing the viewer to participate in the act of witnessing which it mediates.

The book is divided into five sections of three essays each. The first deals with the body of the witness, the second with the active role of the spectator in witnessing, the third with the reappropriation of found and archival images. The fourth section addresses the manipulation of time and space involved in the narration of trauma; the negotiation in the present of a past event, and the way in which the traumatic past infects the present, even for those who did not experience the original trauma – what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’. The final section examines the reflexive questioning of the act of witnessing itself. The essays range widely in subject matter, both chronologically and geographically, and address subjects from the Armenian genocide of 1915 and the reception of lynching photography in America, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa.

As might be expected, some of the contributions are stronger than others: this reviewer found the chapters on lynching photography, Gerhard Richter’s 18. Oktober 1977, Boris Mikhailov and Vietnam Home Movies to be the most cogent and compelling. That said, all offer insights into particular historically-situated examples of traumatic witnessing, which is what the editors set out to do. The Holocaust is dealt with in two chapters, but does not dominate the agenda. The editors do not tackle the question of the singularity of the Holocaust, of whether it can be regarded as the most extreme example in a history of horrific brutality or if it must stand-alone. This is probably wise, as such a question could overwhelm a book like this, which is after all intended as an intervention in a broad debate about the capacity of images to adequately witness trauma and a pointer toward further research, rather than an in-depth analysis of the process of witnessing or the relative position of Holocaust studies vis-à-vis trauma studies in general. However, it would have been interesting to include a chapter
dealing with the reaction to the images of torture from Abu Ghraib, which seems relevant in this context. This reviewer would also have appreciated a more detailed examination of the relationship of visual images to a witnessing that is conceived largely in terms of oral or written narration of the survivors’ stories. To what extent can an image bear witness in itself, or is it always a support or medium for the narration of a verbal witnessing? This question is touched on in the chapter on lynching photography, but more direct examination, perhaps in an afterword, would have been welcome. That said, the collection serves as a useful introduction to a hitherto neglected approach to the interrogation of visual culture. It usefully points out avenues for further research, and certainly makes a strong case for the reassessment of the image’s capacity to bear witness to traumatic experience. As such, it may be considered a useful addition to the burgeoning literature on the witnessing of trauma.


5 Each subsequent act of testimony is like a replay of this ‘first time’, replicating the traumatic impulse toward repetition of the event itself.