The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture

By Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas

The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture is a timely interdisciplinary collection of original essays concerning the ethical stakes of the image in our visually-saturated age. It explores the role of the material image in bearing witness to historical events and the visual representation of witnesses to collective trauma. In arguing for the agency of the image, this unique collection debates post-traumatic memory, documentary ethics, embodied vision, and the recycling of images. It discusses works by Chris Marker, Errol Morris, Derek Jarman, Doris Salcedo, Gerhard Richter, and Boris Mikhailov, along with images from popular culture, including websites and home movies.

Cultural studies abound with declarations and denunciations of our image-saturated contemporary world. Computer screens, video monitors and electronic billboards fill the social spaces of work, leisure and education. Television has become almost as fixed in public spaces as it has in our living rooms. Billboards and hoardings, magazines and advertisements tutor us in our consumer desire. The World Wide Web has taken over as our primary source of information. And where we find words – in newspapers and books or on the Internet – our eye is instantly drawn to the images to verify, convince or titillate us.

However, what cultural studies often fail to acknowledge in their critique of the hegemony of the visual is that hand in hand with this popular attachment to the currency of images, we also treat them with an equally popular scepticism. For all our reliance on images, we never quite believe in their revelations. Despite the privilege given to the authority and presence of the image, it is, after all, just an image, a picture. It might be manipulated, biased in perspective: it does not fully reveal the truth of what it claims to represent.

This scepticism has become even more pronounced in an age of greater technological sophistication when images can be generated without an original referent. How can we ever be confident that the image tells the truth when we live in a world where, however transparent images may appear, they are, in reality, ‘opaque, distorting, arbitrary [mechanisms] of representation … [processes] of ideological mystification’?[1]

It is not only the production and proliferation of images that generate doubt about their veracity. Their modes of exhibition and circulation do little to build our confidence in their truth value. Images flicker past our eyes in a moment too ephemeral to allow us to test their substantiality. So many of the public images which make up our sensory environment are not trusted to be on display for more than a second or two. Their producers imagine that we will find them monotonous and superfluous, or that time might enable the kind of unsanctioned thinking that leads to unwanted questions and criticisms. There is usually no time to build a relationship with the image; if we are not in motion, then the image is designed to pass us by in an instant.
Each image thus appears to ensure its own built-in obsolescence. As Susan Sontag notes, ‘Image-glut keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content. Image-flow precludes a privileged image.’[2] In keeping with the demands of capital, there is no time to discover, to reflect, to learn or to imagine in the presence of the image. Rather, the image is at its most stable when it is functional, goal-oriented, silently reinforcing a textual discourse.

This iconoclasm that pervades the production, dissemination and philosophy of the image in the twenty-first century is nowhere more pronounced than it is in relation to images of traumatic historical events. In spite of the ubiquity of public images that witness such events, there is a persistent scepticism expressed toward their capacity to remember or redeem the experience of the traumatised victim. Similarly, images have been repeatedly deemed inadequate in the face of events understood to be too heinous to be represented. This is because, hitherto, images have been embraced for their mimetic promise, for their perceived ability to produce a representation which addresses the demand for evidence triggered by historical trauma.

As Kyo Maclear asserts in her study of ‘testimonial art’ about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the visual art of witnessing has long been ‘tethered to criteria of accuracy and authenticity’ that insist on an ‘evidentiary necessity’ as the principal function of such art. [3] And if, as trauma studies maintained in the last decades of the twentieth century, no representation can even begin to communicate the truth of the traumatic experience, then the mimetic image claims to represent what is, in fact, unrepresentable.

Consider, for example, the criticism levelled at the documentary photographs taken by Allied cameramen and photographers on liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in 1945.[4] These criticisms were founded on a resentment toward the image for its erasure of the humanity and integrity of both the survivors and the dead. These films and photographs may have shown the devastating physical consequences of the camp system on the bodies of its victims, but they did not even begin to approximate either the existential or metaphysical reality of the prisoners’ debasement. Therefore the image fell short of what it claimed. And yet, the same images have subsequently found widespread circulation as documentary evidence of Nazi atrocity and evil in the concentration camps. Even though they were taken on liberation, when the Germans had abandoned the camps, the images are often held up as windows onto the horror of life during incarceration.[5]
Los Angeles policemen in 1991 were elevated to an iconic status: they gave birth to a riot that arguably changed the face of race relations in the United States. And yet, the graphic depictions of police brutality were deemed not sufficiently authentic to hold the perpetrators responsible in the criminal court case. Despite the prosecutors' claims for the video's evidential status, the defence attorneys successfully argued that there was more to the event, more that the image did not, or chose not to see. By stressing the limitations of the image, the defence was able to reframe the meaning of what the image actually captured. Thus, the brutal beating of King came to be seen by the jury as the necessary subjugation of a violent felon.

In a widely discussed example from the Iraq War, the provocative digital pictures taken in 2004 of tortured Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib prison continue to be disseminated as evidence of US violence toward Iraqi prisoners. While the proliferation of discourses on their subject testify to the many lessons of these images, the debate regarding their status continues with animation: Do they in fact constitute evidence of systematic torture by US forces? Are the images a form of propaganda that asserts cultural dominance or a despised strategy of added intimidation and humiliation to provoke the Arab prisoners to disclose information? Are they simple documents of the interrogation process? Or are they the perverse souvenirs of aberrant US military personnel, as the Pentagon claims? On the one hand, all of these images are disseminated in abundance, and they carry political conviction way beyond their status as representation. On the other, like many public images of trauma, they also continue to be denigrated, dismissed, questioned and cast in doubt.

This popular scepticism towards the visual representation of historical trauma finds its intellectual correlate in the shared assumptions of two interdisciplinary formations that have profoundly influenced the contemporary course of the humanities: visual studies and trauma studies. Both formations developed partially in response to the poststructuralist critique of representation that understood the categories of truth and the real as effects of discourse, and therefore, as historical constructs. Visual studies have taken up the task of historicising the role of the image and visual representation in modern regimes of truth and knowledge. Trauma studies have sought to redeem the category of the real by connecting it to the traumatic historical event, which presents itself precisely as a representational limit, and even a challenge to imagination itself. Trauma studies thus offer poststructuralist theory a means to reintroduce a political and ethical stake in the representation of the real without regressing to the very notions of mimetic transparency that it has striven to overturn.
Trauma 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. Likewise, in their elucidation of the power dynamics instantiated by the historical development of specific discursively constituted gazes, visual studies demonstrate an iconoclastic impulse to uncover and undo the power of the visual. Even redemptive accounts of the image and visual representation rely on the deconstruction, appropriation or resignification of existing historical modes of seeing. Such redemptive critical work can be found in a wide range of knowledge formations and aesthetic practices. For example, it can be located in the disciplinary crisis in anthropology, the playful postmodernism of New Queer Cinema, art history's institutional critique and the culture-jamming of Adbusters.[12]

While acknowledging the wider limitations and contradictions of bearing witness to historical trauma through visual media, the new scholarship collected in this volume resists the iconoclastic urge within both trauma studies and visual studies. The contributions move beyond a focus on the radical limitations and aporia of visual representation in the face of historical trauma. The individual chapters seek to locate the specific ways that the material image enables particular forms of agency in relation to various historical traumas across the globe. We do not see this agency as some kind of transcendental or essential power held by images, whether redemptive or pernicious, as though they were active agents outside their historical contexts of human production and reception. This type of essentialism of the image is pervasive in the moral panics swirling around media-effects discourses that treat images as monocausal agents of violent and destructive social behaviour.[13]

Faith in an essential power of the image, such as we see in these moral panics, is likely to lead to an iconoclastic agenda similar to popular scepticism toward the image. The agency of the material image upon which this collection focuses, is grounded in the performative (rather than constative) function of the act of bearing witness. Within the context of bearing witness, material images do not merely depict the historical world, they participate in its transformation.

Endnotes

[4] See the documentaries A Painful Reminder (Sidney Bernstein, 1985) and Memory of the Camps (Sergei Nolbandov, 1993). The most vehement criticism came with Claude Lanzmann's Shoah (1986), but the criticism began with Alain Resnais' Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog, 1955).
As Barbie Zelizer has argued, the broad symbolic function of these images was established right at their initial public circulation in 1945: 'The transformation of atrocity photos from definitive indices of certain actions to symbolic markers of the atrocity story had to do with a general and urgent need to make sense of what had happened.' Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 139.

On the manipulation of the George Holliday footage of Rodney King's beating, see Bill Nichols, Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 17–42.


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The critical study of memorials continues to occupy the attention of scholars working across the boundaries of trauma studies, memory studies, history, and visual culture studies. This study introduces The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture, Wallflower Press, 2007. Embed. Trauma 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. Likewise, in their elucidation of the power dynamics instantiated by the historical development of discursively constituted gazes, visual studies demonstrate an iconoclastic impulse to uncover and undo the power of the visual. Collectively, the chapters of the book intervene in theoretical conceptions of the image and of the witness within visual studies, trauma studies and documentary studies. The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture is a timely interdisciplinary collection of original essays concerning the ethical stakes of the image in our visually-saturated age. It explores the role of the material image in bearing witness to historical events and the visual representation of witnesses to collective trauma. In arguing for the agency of the image, this unique collection debates post-traumatic memory, documentary ethics, embodied vision, and the recycling of images. It discusses works by Chris Marker, Errol Morris, Derek Jarman, Doris Salcedo, Gerhard Richter, a