



## I Witness: Re-presenting Trauma in and by Cinema

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## **I Witness: Re-presenting Trauma in and by Cinema**

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*This article considers how film helps reconcile a traumatic collective past through representation of a personal trauma. It focuses on the role of witnesses in conveying their experiences regarding events that have traumatized them. The author suggests that a witness to a traumatic event performs the excess of an event that has transformed him or her. By framing the witness as a performer rather than a mere conduit for transferring knowledge to the uninformed, the article underscores the communicative dimension of witnessing by studying this process as an ongoing interplay between addressers and addressees who undergo mutual transformations in and by this action. These arguments are presented through an examination of the film *Waltz With Bashir* (2008), in which its director documented his struggle to come to terms with his personal trauma surrounding the part he played in the Lebanon War. The author suggests that by performing this loss of experience, the director turns the audience into witnesses, thus transforming a personal loss of experience into a collective experience of loss.*

Trauma and the effects of catastrophes and victimization on the formation of self and collective identity are one of the key issues in recent academic research (e.g., Agamben 1999; Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004; Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992). Overall, the vast literature on trauma strongly suggests that an individual's failure to work through his or her traumatic past often induces symptoms of psychological distress. Studies have also revealed how the self relies on a sense of

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continuity that makes it impossible to repress the past without paying a substantial psychological price. Yet it has been claimed that this phenomenon is less applicable on a large scale, given that social communities can alter or repress memories of traumatic events with psychological impunity (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Kansteiner, 2002; Margalit, 2002; Sturken, 1997).

By looking at the construction of traumatic events in cinematic artifacts, this article examines the ways in which cinema helps reconcile traumatic collective history through representation of a personal trauma (e.g., Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009; Hyun, 2002). I show that the role of witnesses is crucial in mediating their experiences of events that traumatized them to those who were absent from these events. I suggest that a witness to a traumatic event should not be seen as a mere conduit for transferring knowledge to the uninformed but rather as a performer of an excess of an event which has transformed him or her. By performing the excess of a transformative event, the witness calls upon the audience to participate in the performance, to shed the raiment of the observer and turn into performers who re-enact the painful event that changed him or her.

By framing the witness as a performer of a traumatic event, I attempt to bridge the gap between two lines of investigation. The first derives from the field of trauma theory and focuses on questions of victimhood and the social implications of suffering (e.g., Agamben, 1999; Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992). The second concerns the engagement of audiences in distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999) and with the moral standing of mediated experience (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2004; Couldry, 2006; Silverstone, 2007; Sontag, 2004). In availing myself of both research strands, I hope to underscore the communicative dimension of witnessing by studying this process as an ongoing interplay between speakers and listeners/observers who are mobilized by the event they bear witness to.

In this article, I form my arguments through a close examination of a cinematic witnessing text—the animated feature film *Waltz With Bashir* (Israel, 2008), in which its director, Ari Folman, documented his struggle to come to terms with a personal trauma surrounding his military service in the Lebanon War of 1982.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that in performing *in* and *by* this witnessing text—the loss of memory and hence of experiences during the war—the director turns the audience into witnesses, thus transforming a personal loss of experience into a collective experience of loss (Alexander et al., 2004; Brand, 2009).

## THE WITNESS: THEORIZING THE CATEGORY

The 20th century was marred by unprecedented acts of violence and victimizations. These events, which are being studied, discussed, and exhibited

more than ever before in video, audio, and through written outlets, not only affected the material and historical world order, but also had profound conceptual implications. Surely, the theoretical and artistic fields have undergone crucial transformations, which deservedly can be described as a 'catastrophic turn' in the realm of thinking and the problems facing manifold frameworks of theoretical discourse. In particular, it has been suggested that the traditional ways of assessing and representing human experience fail to encompass and account for the suffering caused by traumatic events (e.g., Friedlander, 1992). A horrific event, as the argument goes, overwhelms the victims to the point in which they are unable to "know" the occurrence that traumatized them and hence cannot express or document it *in* or *by* language. In other words, the victim's language is stymied by the traumatic experience, and this phenomenon is signified by a failure of the vocabulary of knowledge. Nevertheless, as Felman and Laub (1992) rightly claimed, there is a need to speak about such events if we are to heal their repute in history. This observation brings an apparent paradox to the forefront: A traumatic experience must be explicated in order to allow potential audiences to comprehend, judge, and act upon it, but the means of representation (i.e., sounds, words, and images) are inadequate to the task at hand (Silverstone, 2004). Such a significant assessment poses both a theoretical and practical challenge; namely, how can an ostensibly inscrutable event possibly be grasped and spoken about? How can a victim's experience of a traumatic event (the pain and cries, which cannot be mastered, known, or represented) be "re-presented"?

Scholars have recently taken an important step toward addressing these complex questions. It has been suggested that the human experience of traumatic events that cannot be represented as "knowledge" (in principle, knowledge is universally accessible) should be characterized as a singular event that has been endured and whose existence can only be "borne" by victims who were present at the event. Therefore, the victim essentially testifies to the excess of an event that only he or she is privy to—a secret that singularizes him or her (LaCapra, 2001; Peretz, 2003). This significant observation leads to the new notion of *witness*—an individual who has lived through an event that exceeds the ability to convey this knowledge.

To avoid oversimplification, I briefly point out two crucial features of this new definition of witness that are either explicitly or implicitly present in the literature. First, the witness to a traumatic event is not external to the events but rather is implicated in them and is transformed by them. Hence, the testimony of a witness cannot be validated like legal testimony or journalistic reporting in which the knowledge presented by the witness to a source of authority is assumed to be available to all. In the process of testifying, a witness to a traumatic event establishes a different kind of authority, one which derives from itself and cannot be vouchsafed by others (e.g., LaCapra, 2001; Peretz, 2003; Wiewiorka, 2006).

Second, the witness in this new sense is both active and passive. Witnesses to traumatic events are above all passive given that they do not choose to be present at the event; it is unwittingly forced on them. In other words, victims do not decide to be victimized; the pain is imposed upon them against their will, such that they have no control over the event they have experienced. Consequently, they can neither grasp nor master the event they testify to. Notwithstanding their intimate and harrowing involvement in the tragedy, a victim does not necessarily occupy a “witnessing position” with respect to that same event (he or she may be relegated to the role of spectator or observer). For bearing witness to a traumatic event can imply engaging in an act in which the individual (a) performs the horrific event and pain and (b) mobilizes the hearers during and via the performance. However, the fact that the witness actively engages in a transformative event does not necessarily mean that the act of witnessing is voluntary. In fact, the very opposite would appear to be true, in that traumatic experiences compel their victims to share an experience that they are incapable of grasping. In other words, the act of bearing witness is forced upon them and they testify “against their will” to an event they cannot master and hence cannot represent as knowledge. Thus, one way to receive and transmit a transformative event that cannot be comprehended is to become the cry of the horrific event, similar to an actor who becomes one with his or her role. In the words of Eyal Peretz (2003), “The witness is the actor of the disaster or the cry” (p. 12).

#### MEDIA WITNESSING: AUDIENCING CATASTROPHES IN A POST-HOLOCAUST WORLD

Either explicitly or implicitly the media, and more specifically cinema, the medium at the heart of this study, play a crucial role in the conceptualization of this new definition of the witness/actor who performs an event he or she can neither know nor master. In their seminal work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) that helped shape this concept, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub stressed that their insights were the result of on-camera interviews with Holocaust survivors. This archive of audio-visual testimonies was established by Dori Laub, himself a child survivor, and his filmmaker colleague Laurel Vlock who suggested, when developing this project in 1979, that audio-visual technologies could be used successfully to document the testimonies of survival and save them for the benefit of future generations. However, the function of audio-visual technologies used in this project was more than the establishment of an audio-visual archive; the media technology became the means by which survivors recovered their traumatic experiences, possibly for the first time. Geoffrey Hartman (2001) explained:

The camera [. . .] because it focused on the face and gestures of the witnesses, was anything but cold: in fact, it “reembodied” those who had been denied their free and human body-image in the camps. [. . . .] What is essential is the mental space such minimal visibility (“I see a voice!”) allows. Witnesses can now “see better” into, or listen more effectively to, themselves [. . .]. (p. 118)

While enabling survivors to recover their repressed narratives, these media technologies function at the same time as tools by which audiences who were not present at the events (in time, space, or both) were connected to the survivors’ traumatic experiences and could respond to the proximity created by them. In this respect, the conceptualization of the new category of the witness is inherently predicated on media witnessing, which became the ultimate goal and the primary justification for Holocaust witnessing (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009, p. 4).

Over the years, audio-visual testimonies of Holocaust survivors that were filmed, re-produced, circulated, and disseminated to millions around the globe came to exemplify the emergence of the genre of Holocaust testimony. Now, more than 60 years after the end of the Second World War, testimonial forms of Holocaust survival are constantly created, reproduced, circulated, and disseminated in, by and through the mass media (Wieviorka, 2006). Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and one of the War’s most compelling voices noted, “If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony” (1977, p. 9). It is ironic that the discourse of “that to which no one can bear witness” became the hallmark of witnessing discourse in general and the profound commitment entailed by witnessing in the post-Holocaust world.

Concern with the role of the media in bearing witness to horror and catastrophes is reflected in media studies that can be divided into two main approaches: the vicarious witness and the implicated witness.

The prototype of the vicarious witness is arguably John Ellis’s (1999) discussion of contemporary media witnesses. According to Ellis (1999), the 20th century was the century of witness, and it provided audiences with visual evidence of worldwide events through the media of photography, film, and television. The most striking outcome of this feature is that “I did not know” and “I did not realize” are no longer open to us as a defense (Ellis, 1999, p. 9). Similarly, Roger Silverstone (2002) claimed that by defining audiences as active and reflexive we presume that they inevitably assume a moral stance: “If audiences refuse to take that responsibility, then they are morally culpable. And we are all audiences now” (p. 774). Both Ellis and Silverstone contended that a profound shift has taken place in the way we, as humans, perceive the world beyond our immediate reach. We are all

witnesses to what is taking place somewhere else, and this very fact implies that we are somehow responsible.

The second approach is more restricted in scope in that it emphasizes the distinction between mere spectators and witnessing agents. The fundamental premise here is that one qualifies as a witness predominantly by virtue of being present at an event. John Durham Peters (2001) specified three types of relationships to an event that render an individual an apt witness: (a) presence at both the time and place of the event (“to be there”); (b) presence at the time, but not at the actual scene; and last, (c) presence in space, but removed in time (2001, pp. 720–721). According to Peters’s schema, the first modality is the quintessential example of witnessing: “The witness is authorized to speak by having been at the occurrence. A private experience enables a public statement” (2001, p. 710). That said, Peters conceded that witnessing may transcend temporal and spatial specificities. Being present at a distance, such as watching a live broadcast, may also fall under the rubric of witnessing; because the observer is situated in the same temporal realm as the event, he or she could acquire a sense of remote participation. Similarly, being absent in time but present at the site also constitutes a modality of witnessing, for it provides simultaneity across time, especially through physical artifacts of past events. Peters clearly considered the last two scenarios to be derivatives of the first, paradigmatic case, given that they each have only one of the basic temporal or spatial determinants. His hierarchy ultimately excluded a fourth modality of witnessing: absence in both time and space. Peter opined that this combination constitutes a situation “in which the attitude of witnessing is hardest to sustain” (p. 720).

These two approaches to conceptualizing witnessing draw from different sources and promote different understandings of witnessing altogether. The vicarious witness approach has spawned discussion on the audience’s engagement in distant suffering (e.g., Boltanski, 1999; Kaplan, 2005), and on the moral stance of mediated experience (e.g., Couldry, 2006; Frosh, 2006; Sontag, 2004). Nevertheless, the position occupied by remote viewers of distant suffering has also been credited with generating social indifference, producing an organized “state of denial” (Cohen, 2001), and more generally, coinciding with forms of moral distancing. The implicated witness approach, however, is rooted theoretically in trauma theory and Holocaust studies, and it has prompted questions on the social implications of mediating personal trauma and the collective commitment entailed by witnessing in a post-Holocaust world (e.g., Peters, 2001; Tester, 1997).

Notwithstanding these vast differences in conceptualizations of witnessing, it is important to note that they all link the witness to knowledge. People throughout the world, as the argument goes, see and hear far-flung events in and by testimonial texts, and hence “we cannot say we do not know [them]” (Ellis, 2000, p. 9). In effect, most of the recent modifications to the category of witness in media studies echo modern conceptions in which the witness

is defined as an individual who reports on knowledge that is uniquely available to him or to her. The vicarious witness approach which positions the removed addressee, who acquired information about a certain event as a witness to that occurrence, defines it as a situation one inhabits irrespective of his or her position vis-à-vis the event. The second approach ultimately renders witnessing an epistemological affair that is concerned with what the witness, who was present at the event (in time, space or both), knows and how he or she obtained that knowledge (e.g., Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009; Peters, 2001). However, these two different conceptions engender an analytical conundrum in which victims bear witness to events they neither know nor master and hence cannot represent as knowledge.

In what follows, I attempt to add another layer to this discourse by framing the witness to a traumatic event as *a performer* of an excess of an event which has transformed him or her, rather than a conduit for transferring (exclusive) knowledge to the uninformed. In so doing, I focus on the witness' existing experiences, and on the relationship between the witnessing agent and his or her prospective audiences. I suggest that witnessing should be viewed as a communicative process; namely an interplay between speakers and listeners/observers who are implicated as well as mobilized by the event they bear witness to. Therefore, unlike spectators or observers, witnesses (as well as those who witness the witness) are not external to the subject at hand. Not only are they involved in the event, they are transformed by their participation.

By framing the act of bearing witness to horrific events as a performance, I aim to highlight the moral decision making inherent to this undertaking. I suggest that in performing the excess of an event, the witness embraces a sense of responsibility toward the event that he or she has participated in and was transformed by. I suggest furthermore that it is through the act of bearing witness to a transformative event that the witness transfers some of this responsibility to his or her addressees by turning them into once-removed witnesses (Ellis, 1999; Frosh, 2006; Katriel, 2009; Peretz, 2003).

## RE-PRESENTING THE 'MISSING' EXPERIENCE

The public's engagement in historical traumas like the Second World War, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb and more recently, ethnic cleansing and terror attacks appears to be heavily dependent and predicated on oral, visual and textual forms of testimony. However, as already noted, testimony does not offer a definitive or comprehensive account of these events. Instead, it is

... composed of bits and pieces of memory that have been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or



remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge or assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference (Felman, 1992, p. 5).

This observation regarding the nature of testimonial texts is reflected in many studies on the psychology of trauma which focus on cases in which harrowing experiences have hindered the victims' capacity to remember, comprehend, assess and thus narrate the traumatic event (e.g., Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1997). What follows from this is the realization that self-knowledge of these sorts of events cannot be attained before the act of witnessing. Hence, the process of bearing witness to a horrific event essentially begins when a victim testifies to a void within him- or herself, which can be traced to the excessive suffering inflicted by an event that has yet to enter consciousness, in spite and because of, its overwhelming nature. The event can only come into being, so to speak, during and through the process of bearing witness.

As argued earlier, the transformation of an abstract absence into an articulated statement and an inaccessible past into an obtainable narrative involves a communicative act in which the victim performs his or her pain to an audience that acts as an interlocutor to whom the event is re-presented for the first time (Laub, 1992, p. 57). It is only when the pain is communicated to an audience that the trauma can be processed and the painful event comprehended. To use a somewhat different metaphor, a text can only be read if there is a white slate upon which to etch the dark letters. The "whiteness" may be produced by a human agent (either intentionally or by default), but the contrasting backdrop to the letters and lines is a prerequisite for constructing a text. Therefore, a testimony (the witnessing text) can only be produced (and brought into being) by dint of the presence of a listener/viewers. As such, knowledge can only be generated *de novo* through the combined efforts of the witness and his or her addressees, who bear witness to the witness. It is precisely the collaboration between these different agents that facilitates and signifies the transformation of the passive victim into an active agent. Only at this juncture can victims, who were unable know the event, begin to come to terms with their lost experience, and begin to know it.

Throughout the animated feature film *Waltz With Bashir*, the director, Ari Folman (2008) attempted to discover what actually happened in the Lebanon War and why he and his former comrades in arms had no recollection of it, "not even a dream." In referring to his loss of memory, a syndrome known in the literature as combat neurosis, shell shock or post-traumatic stress disorder (see discussion in Herman, 1997; Shephard, 2000), Folman positioned himself (as well as his comrades in arms) as victims; young soldiers who had to participate in violent occurrences that they could not resist, comprehend, or master.

While highlighting his endeavor to recollect his loss of memory regarding the part he played in the war, Folman highlighted the crucial interplay between the witness/performer who loses an experience and the audience who, in the process of watching the film, are witnessing an experience of loss: "The film talks about lost memory," Folman said in an interview. "I ask the question I had to ask myself: Where does memory hide? And I hope that the audiences will start wondering about themselves. Hopefully, when you've seen it, you will think about yourself—not about the guy in the film."<sup>2</sup>

The director here, in referring to his own amnesia regarding the war in Lebanon, is imagining audiences that will act as witnesses to his testimony of forgotten events, and more importantly will be mobilized by his performance. It is this perception of an (imagined) audience who would agree to listen to his cry that enabled the director to come to terms with his loss and gradually retrieve it.

Folman's failure to recall his own experiences of the horrific events of the war is immediately expressed in the title of the film. The title *Waltz With Bashir* refers to a scene in which Samuel Freankel, one of the interviewees and commander of Folman's infantry unit at the time of the film's events, grabs a light machine gun and dances an insane waltz amid heavy enemy fire on a Beirut street festooned with huge posters of Bashir Gemayel, the president of Lebanon. By choosing a title that portrays an illusionary act, the director who bears witness to his commander's testimony positions the audiences as witnesses to the soldier's trauma. The title draws Folman and the audiences into a fictional world of hallucination. In focusing on this experience of a soldier who cannot comprehend, master or narrate the event that haunts him, the director turns the audience into witnesses of this void. The filmic performance of this loss (which is available only to the soldier) enables him, and by implication Folman, to come to terms with the horrific events and begin to make sense of them.

The experience of a traumatized young soldier, who cannot master or comprehend the events that transformed him, is repeated in the first sequence of the film. The film opens with a long shot of wild dogs roaming the devastated ruins of Beirut, finally stopping beneath a building to growl menacingly at a man looking down from a window. The dogs, as the audience soon find out, come from a recurring nightmare of Boaz, one of Folman's childhood friends. There are exactly 26 dogs; 26 because that is the number of dogs Boaz shot and killed to silence their barking before they could warn villagers who were about to be invaded of the approach of the troops. Boaz, in the film, invites Folman to hear a detailed description of his nightmare, to bear witness to his pain. They meet in a coffee shop on a stormy night and Boaz says: "I don't remember anything, nothing, so I called you." Folman replies, "I'm just a filmmaker." And Boaz asks, "Can't a film be therapeutic? You have dealt with all the issues in your life in your films, right?"

Boaz, in performing his horrific experience (a secret that is known only to him) turns Folman (his filmmaker friend) into a witness who agrees to listen to his cry and help him situate his experiences in a familiar narrative in order to comprehend them and perhaps even normalize the events (Cohen, 2001, p. 131). Boaz asks Folman whether he remembers the war: “No flashbacks from Lebanon?” Folman replies, “No, not really.” This interaction between Boaz, who witnesses the excess of the traumatic events and Folman who bears witness to the witness, facilitates a mutual transformation. It allows Boaz to begin to grasp the events which traumatized him, but more importantly, it enables Folman, the key witness in the film, to realize he also is experiencing his own amnesia regarding his activities in the war, and to retrieve his memory of the violent events he had repressed. In the scene that follows, Folman states, “The meeting with Boaz took place in the Winter of 2006. That night for the first time in 20 years I had a flashback of the war in Lebanon. Not just Lebanon, West Beirut. Not just Beirut but the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.”

From this point—a realization that he had played an active role in the horrific occurrences of the war—the director projects his amnesia regarding the events that traumatized him onto various individuals, most of whom were his former comrades in arms. He hopes, like his friend Boaz, that through these interactions he will retrieve his lost memories and more importantly comprehend the (collective) events he took part in. The audiences play a dual role—they serve as witnesses to Folman’s informers who perform their loss to Folman. They also serve as witnesses to Folman (the witness to the witnesses) who performs his own pain and loss in and by the film to both his interviewees and to his imagined audiences in the cinema.

Like Boaz, Folman when trying to know and make sense of the horrific events of the war, performs his vague dreams regarding the events through his voice and his animated scenes.<sup>3</sup> In a scene (which is repeated twice in the film) he and his comrades are swimming naked in the sea, emerging to dry themselves in an eerie silence on an empty beach. While Folman and his comrades are lolling on the beach, a massacre took place in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. Folman cannot recall the awful events in the camps. Yet, the repeated performance of this void (the amnesia regarding what actually happened) facilitates a transformation in both the director and the audiences who bear witness to the witness. The film’s director/witness is starting to make sense of the events which traumatized him, and the audience on which the director’s trauma is projected begins to realize the overwhelming (collective) events that the witness is testifying to.

Folman’s transformation begins when he describes his vague dream to his psychologist friend. This encounter with an interlocutor who bears witness to the witness enables Folman to get to know the event and understand the role he played in it. However, as is discussed below, this realization is far from being straightforward. It comprises two interrelated layers: In the

first, Folman realizes the collective (Israeli) responsibility for the massacre; in the second, he realizes his own activity.

In the beginning of the sequence, Folman says to his psychologist friend, "It's amazing. A massacre took place. It was carried out by Christian Phalangists." Folman here acknowledges the massacre but puts the blame on others—the Phalangists. Despite the fact that the film is constructed around a self realization of a lost experience and attempts to retrieve it, the sequence which initiates this process starts with a denial of Israeli actions, and by implication a rejection of personal responsibility. It is only after condemning the Phalangists with this mass murder that Folman sets out on a personal journey to understand the actions of the Israelis as well as his own deeds. In the meeting with his psychologist friend, he recalls, "All around were several circles of our soldiers. Every circle had some information. The first one had the most. However, the penny didn't drop. They didn't realize they were witnessing a genocide."

The word *our* in the first sentence is significant. By using this pronoun Folman acknowledges his responsibility for the horrific event he will later bear witness to. At the same time, he creates a close tie with his imagined audience by positioning himself and his addressees as members of a similar (national) community. It is interesting that in the second part of the passage, by using the pronoun *they*, he pulls himself away from the circles, as it were, and rejects personal responsibility: "*They* didn't realize they were witnessing a genocide" (italics added). Thus, information is given regarding the role the Israeli national community played in the massacre but no information is provided as to Folman's position and actions in this dreadful event. In the words of Stanley Cohen, "The public historical record is acknowledged, but one's own role is excised" (2001 p. 125). It is important to note that in highlighting the role the Israelis played in the massacre, Folman again stresses that the Israelis (both the leadership and the high command of the Israeli Defence Forces) do not bear direct responsibility for the massacre because they did not commit it. Their only wrongdoing, according to Folman, is to have misapprehended the event they witnessed; "[T]he penny didn't drop. They didn't realize they were witnessing a genocide."

Folman's friend, the psychologist Ori Sivan, refuses to accept this personal and collective denial, and suggests that this denunciation is the source of Folman's symptoms of psychological distress. He forces his addressee to realize the role he played in the massacre at Shabra and Shatila: "What circle were you in?" he asks him, "What did you do?" This encounter with an interlocutor (in this case the psychologist) allows Folman to bear witness to his experience for the first time. This communicative process of uttering the lost experience enables the witness and his addressees, both the psychologist and the cinema audience to begin to comprehend the event. In the second part of the sequence, Folman recalls the event: "We stood

on the roof and the sky was lit up.” It is interesting to note that in this short sentence Folman uses both active and the passive constructions. He realizes that he was present at the event in time and in space, but refuses to take responsibility for his actions; “the sky *was* lit” (italics added), he says. Here again the psychologist/friend encourages Folman, the witness, to acknowledge his actions, and hence responsibility for the event: “With what?” he asks. Then Folman recalls, “With flares that must have helped them to do what they were doing.” Here, for the first time in the film, Folman acknowledges his actions, but once again refuses to take responsibility for the massacre. This continuous denial of personal responsibility ends in the next scene in which the friend/psychologist forces Folman to realize the implications of his actions: “Did you fire the flares?” he asks. Folman answers, “Is it important? Does it make any difference if I fired them or if I just saw the flares that helped people shoot others?” It is only after this encounter with an addressee who was absent in time and in space from the event that Folman begins to grasp the event he was involved in, and realize the nature of the experience that transformed him. For the first time in his testimony regarding the massacre in Sabra and Shatila he uses the pronoun *I*; “Does it make any difference if *I* fired them?” (italics added). It is worth noting, however, that even after realizing his own deeds Folman refuses to take on greater responsibility for the event. He asks himself as well as his addressees (the psychologist in the film and the audiences who are watching it) if there is a difference between committing an act and knowing about acts others committed. His friend provides an answer: “You felt guilty at the age of 19. Unwillingly, you took on the role of the Nazis. You were there firing flares, but you didn’t carry out the massacre.” At this point significant transitions occur: the witness and the witnesses to the witness (both on and off screen) realize two crucial elements. First, Folman, the witness, was indeed involved in the event that traumatized him, and second that his trauma was the outcome of his role as a perpetrator rather than his position as a victim. In the following sections I discuss these crucial transitions in detail.

### REPRESENTING THE “MISSING” BODY

Like an actor performing on stage, victims of an overwhelmingly painful event reveal their bodies when bearing witness before an audience. As Raya Morag observed, “The visibility of the trauma seems to be first and foremost the visibility of the human body” (Morag, 2008, p. 4). This is especially relevant to the case studied here of soldiers who took part in fierce battles and were exposed either directly or indirectly to violence. Studies have indicated that although these individuals were not wounded, they had physical symptoms of distress; they could neither see, smell nor taste properly. Some were

unable to stand up, speak, urinate, or defecate; some vomited uncontrollably and others lost their memories (discussed in Shephard, 2000).

By testifying to the great pain that was inflicted upon him, in this case memory loss, the soldier changes his course. In exposing the body that survived the war, the witness functions as a conveyor of pain. His voice can only be heard through the “coming into being” of the wounded body. In other words, the excess of the events can only be transmitted by means of a metamorphosis of the soldier into a witness. The significance of this sort of bodily performance lies in the fact that it enables the audience to gaze back at the other, the witness, who performs an untold tale. It is the mutual willingness to engage in this process and risk unsettling one’s equanimity that makes such a performance possible and meaningful (Ullman, 2006).

The audiences who watch Folman’s film are exposed to the soldiers’ (the witnesses’) bodies which appear on screen as they testify to their traumatic experience (and by implication to their lost experiences). However, while representing the bodies who survived the war the director is also highlighting the lacuna inherent in the representation of trauma, namely that “[t]he trauma itself resides in what cannot be seen, or what is only partially seen” (Acton, 2004, p. 63). Folman chose to document the testimonies of soldiers (including his own) about the traumatic events of the war in animation. He and his team filmed their interviewees in a studio. Sitting on chairs against a black backdrop, the witnesses perform their pain and cry in front of a video camera. The footage was edited and this version made its way to the animators’ desk. The animators, using the edited footage, created a storyboard of the interviews and prepared a simple animation, based on black-and-white sketches. When the editing of this stage of the film was complete, the team began to work on the final animation, the output presented to audiences in the cinema.

By using an animation technique the witnesses (including Folman himself) expose their bodies when bearing witness to their traumas. Yet, in this (animated) bodily performance they in a fact conceal their “real” bodies and present an immune body, an animated cartoon that can never be injured. The lack of a (real) wounded body is crucial. By exposing the audience to this absence the director turns his addressees into witnesses who, in the process of watching the film, experience the loss that the witness testifies to. As mentioned earlier, the animated film draws the audience into a fictional world of hallucination; like the traumatized witnesses in the film, the witnesses to the (animated) witnesses lose their sense of reality. They are exposed in the film and by it to a surreal world. It is arguable that this kind of representation could generate a distance between the “real” witnesses who perform their pain on screen, and the audience who agrees to take part in this performance and listen to the cry. Yet, this distance is significant because it facilitates two different (yet related) “moves.” First, it enables the audience to come closer to the witness who performs his pain and

loss. This proximal, but still once-removed distance enables the audience to experience the witnesses' experience of loss. The second transformation is that of the witness. The animated figure enables the witnesses to remove themselves from the events that traumatized them, and establish a proper distance from which they can gaze back at the event and begin to make sense of it. This act is particularly salient in the case of Folman, the key witness of the film, whose animated figure retrieves his lost memory in and by the film. When the witness recovers his memory he realizes the nature of his trauma and the role he played in the mass murder in the refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila. It is interesting to note that despite the fact that the witness realizes the active role he played in the occurrence—being at the event and firing flares—the information regarding the actual event is provided by an outsider, a journalist who was not present at the scene. Folman stresses this reclusive position of the journalist when he introduces him in the film. The sequence begins with a travelling shot of Israeli soldiers getting shot in the streets of Beirut voiced-over by the director/witness who recalls his experience:

We were walking along a promenade towards a large intersection. Then we come under sniper fire from the upper floor of the hotel. We can't see where it's coming from or who is shooting. A wounded soldier was lying in the intersection, but we couldn't get to him. We were scared to death. Then in the middle of this hell the TV correspondent Ron Ben-Yishai suddenly shows up. He's walking upright dodging bullets like Superman strolling along as if nothing's wrong, while bullets whiz past him.

Whereas the Israeli soldiers are presented as victims who were exposed to violent acts they could not comprehend, the journalist is presented as an immune figure. It is striking that he is unaffected by the horrific events of war, notably the events at Sabra and Shatila. Both the witness and the witnesses to the witness begin to "know" the mass murder at the refugee camps through his eyes. The sequence starts with a mid close-up of Ron Ben-Yishai entering the refugee camps and walking among the ruins. He recalls this experience in a voice-over:

Inside the camp we saw a huge amount of rubble. My eyes noticed a hand, a small hand. A child's hand stuck out from the rubble. I looked a bit closer and saw curls. A head of curls covered in dust . . . The Palestinians in refugee camps have houses with courtyards. These courtyards were full of bodies of women and children . . . We entered one alley, a very narrow alley the width of a man and a half. That alley was full, piled up to the height of a man's chest with bodies of young men. That's when I became aware of the outcome of the massacre.

Ben-Yishai's testimony ends with a close-up of Folman's eyes. It is at this point that the witness realizes he was (physically) present at the event which traumatized him. Yet, in contrast to the journalist who provides information on the massacre, Folman's animated figure is mute. The director's decision to end his self-presentation as a verbally impaired witness is telling, not only in terms of the loss of life but also in terms of a loss of voice and experience. A wordless testimony thus serves to symbolize the personal trauma of the witness, as well as the collective trauma of the Israelis—the perpetrators. To a detailed discussion of this issue I now turn.

### THE 'MISSING' (MORAL) COMMUNITY

In a television interview about the film, Folman discussed his intentions:<sup>4</sup>

You as an audience will end up watching the film. [If] you go out of the theatre and think 'this is a cool animated film, nice drawings, very beautiful. I like the music,' I missed the whole point. I wanted you to know that behind those beautiful drawings and animation they are real people. They were slaughtered. They were killed. There were kids there. There were women there.

Significantly, information about the Sabra and Shatila massacre is accessible to all through journalists, historians, and the like. Thus, the film does not provide new facts to the uninformed. Rather its importance as a witnessing text lies in the lacuna inherent to social witnessing. Unlike legal testimony, which represents an attempt to disentangle different versions of the truth, social witnessing aims to report painful events that are supposedly known but nonetheless are treated as though they never happened. When witnessing agents testify to traumatic, transforming events, they reduce their exclusion and this allows for their return to the collective consciousness. Put differently, social witnessing is linked to a certain type of blindness, or in Hanna Ullman's (2006) words: "It begins where denial reigns" (Ullman, 2006, p. 184). Hence, the process of witnessing in the social sense is motivated by the witnesses' hope that there will someday be a community that will engage with the testimony (Katriel, 2009).

Earlier in this article, I discussed a line of inquiry that prompted questions concerning an audience's engagement in distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999) and the moral stature of mediated experience (e.g., Ellis, 2000; Silverstone, 2007; Sontag, 2004; Tester, 1997). Silverstone (2002, p. 774), for example, suggested that "If audiences refuse to take that responsibility, then they are morally culpable. And we are all audiences now." While noting the responsibility borne by modern audiences for violent events that are covered by the media, these critics have blurred the distinction between an



event's "observer" (the audience) and its "performer" (the witnessing agent). J. L. Austin's seminal book *How to Do Things With Words* (1975) constitutes a propitious springboard for examining this important point. In his book, Austin observed the performative aspect of "saying." He claimed that when a speaker *says* something, he or she is essentially *doing* something. Austin labeled these speech acts "performative utterances." He argued that the consequences of speech acts could take some time before they come into effect and offered a comprehensive analysis of the nature of 'effective' performative utterances, while eschewing specific speech acts (such as testimonies). Nevertheless, his unique insights buttressed my own conceptualization of witnesses as *performers*. I suggest that the act of uttering a statement (testifying) establishes a sphere of operation for altering the course of the witnesses' lives and those of their addressees. I expand on this argument by referring to Avishai Margalit's conception of the "moral witness." According to Margalit, a moral witness testifies to suffering that is inflicted by evil. Margalit insisted that a person who witnesses either evil (e.g., reporting on a vicious plan) or suffering (e.g., surviving a natural disaster) but not both is not a moral witness. In highlighting both these components of witnessing, Margalit touched upon a third element, which in contrast to the first two does not stem from the content of the testimony but from its objective. Margalit argued that testimony is essentially driven by a moral purpose. It reflects the hope for a collective that will "hear" the cry and acknowledge the pain, and thereby usher in a new "reality." Put differently, the testimony's efficacy is measured by the extent to which it establishes and maintains a sphere for moral engagement that persists beyond the moment of the utterance itself.

This objective also finds reflection in Judith Lewis Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997). Similar to Margalit, Herman distinguished between bearing witness to a horrifying "act of God" (e.g., a tsunami) and to atrocities of human design. She contended that audiences cannot remain neutral in cases where the witness was traumatized by human action. Under these circumstances, it is incumbent upon people to pass judgment and take a side. However, in Herman's estimation, the moral imperative points the spotlight on the complex relation between victims and their (potential) addressee. The victim, Herman argued, asks the addressee to share the burden of the pain, while the perpetrators appeal to the audience's universal desire to see, hear and speak no evil in the hopes of avoiding punishment. In other words, the victims clamor for engagement and remembrance, whereas the perpetrators do everything in their power to induce forgetting. Silencing the victim, according to Herman, becomes the tormentor's primary and most effective tool. She maintained that the silence is broken when the victim turns to the audience and is transformed into a witnessing agent. Moreover, this marks the precise point at which the convalescence process (of both the victim and his or her social environment) can begin. It is in this site, she claimed, the distraction is turning onto a survival. However, Herman insisted that

the trauma victim's transformation into a witness is by no means straightforward, for the victims constitute "traces" of an event that an entire community wishes to forget. This creates a situation in which the victim, who would perhaps like to but is unable to forget the disaster, faces considerable social pressures and harbors strong (sometimes unconscious) motives for putting the past behind him or her. In fact, the victim often succeeds in repressing these memories. Therefore, the process of witnessing usually begins when the witness encounters denial, even when the facts are known and the relevant information is accessible. This process exposes the sides of past events which have hitherto been kept in the dark and disavowed, despite that their emotional hold remains intense and present. In light of the aforementioned fact, the act of bearing witness can be pursued among what Chana Ullman (2006, p. 190) termed the "representatives of a moral community": namely, a group of people who agree to listen to the cry, acknowledge the injury, and affirm the hope for a new order. The witness is the one who establishes the necessary connection between a moral community's (potential) representatives and a tragedy by re-enacting the pain and anguish that he or she experienced. More specifically, the witness attains his or her status by transmitting the inordinacy of the horrific event. In performing the transformative event, the witnessing agent calls upon the audience to engage in the performance, to shed the raiment of the listener or observer and transform themselves into performers who re-enact and convey the catastrophe that changed him or her. It is precisely this demand for audience participation (rather than the mere transmission of knowledge) that constitutes the very essence of witnessing evil and suffering; for it is this concerted effort on the part of both the victims and the audience that makes witnessing possible and bestows it with meaning.

This issue becomes particularly salient in the witnessing text studied here. As mentioned earlier, in contrast to legal testimony, which represents an attempt to disentangle different versions of the truth, or journalistic reporting which attempts to provide a version of the truth, the social witnessing that Folman performs aims to report events that are known to the community but nonetheless are treated as though they never happened (Cohen, 2001). Until the last section of the film, Folman positions himself as a victim of war who was traumatized by the events he had participated in. Throughout the film he tries to comprehend his repeated hallucination, the only trace he has from the war, by describing it to others; the audience on screen (his interviewees) and the audience in the cinema (his imagined addressees). However, in his encounters with the various addressees he experiences a sense of loneliness, the solitude of a witness who carries a pain which cannot be transferred to others or shared by them. A crucial component of witnessing becomes apparent here. The witness engages in a communicative act by which he projects his pain on the listener/observer (on the interviewees in the film and on the audience in the cinema). Yet,

it is precisely through this process that he realizes that despite the fact that the event he testified to is a collective one (a war in this case), his personal pain cannot be shared with others. This is apparent in a sequence in which Folman tells his on-screen audience (his interviewees), as well as to the audience in the cinema, that in contrast to the events in the battlefield that he cannot remember, his memories regarding his interactions with his immediate (civilian) community during his vacations at home are clear. In a relatively long sequence, he constructs in animation such memories, focusing on his alienation from his familiar environment during his vacation at home. The sequence begins with a scene in which Folman, the soldier, is strolling down his hometown streets, stopping in front of a display window. In the window he sees a collection of meaningless video clips flickering on countless television screens. He continues walking, looking at people who stare at him as though he were an alien. Folman highlights this alienation in the narration: "I come home and I see that life goes on like nothing ever happened." To this he adds, "Yaeli, my girlfriend left me when everything [the war] started." Folman then remembered that even at home he could not voice his harsh experiences of war. His father, he recalls, minimized his despair by telling him about his own experiences from the wars he had been in, wars in which "soldiers came home for less than forty eight hours."

The focus on the alienation of the witnessing agent is significant. By referring to his past experience, namely the refusal of his immediate (civilian) community to listen to his cry and bear witness to his experiences, the director tries to break a continuous silence. In performing his pain (his loss of memory of the war) in and by the film for the first time in 20 years, Folman invites his potential witnesses to engage in his tale and in doing so to take responsibility for the events which traumatized him.

This issue is particularly important in the case examined here, namely the testimony of a traumatized soldier who performs personal pain regarding a collective painful event. Earlier I discussed the vast number of studies on traumas which indicate that the self cannot repress a traumatic past without paying a substantial psychological price, in contrast to social communities who can repress memories regarding traumatic events with psychological impunity (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Kansteiner, 2002; Margalit, 2002; Sturken, 1997). The collective denial of painful events (in this case the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the support the country gave to those who committed the massacre at Sabra and Shatila) creates a situation in which the individual soldier, who would perhaps like to but is unable to forget the events, faces considerable social pressures and harbors strong motivation to put the past "behind him."

Folman, the key witness of the film, performs his loss in and by the film when he realizes, in the last section of the film, that the events in which he played a significant part have been denied by both his immediate community (family, friends, and neighbors) and his national one. The witness who

performs his cry realizes that he played a dual role in the events he testified to: a victim of war who was traumatized by the violent events he could not comprehend or master, and a doer, a member of a national community that helped the Phalangists in Lebanon to massacre the refugees in the camps of Sabra and Shatila. These repressed experiences (and by implication accountability) become prominent in the final sequence when the film swerves from animation to newsreel images. For the first time, Folman, the key witness in the film, and the audience of the film are exposed to an external source of information—a documentary footage of grieving Palestinians which was filmed by an anonymous photographer. It is in this moment that the void the witness/director experiences (the amnesia and the hallucinations regarding the event) wanes and he begins to make sense of the events. Here, the barrier between the witness and his audience breaks down. Ari Folman, the director and key witness of the film now turns into a “representative of a moral community” (Ullman 2006), a witness to the witnesses who acknowledges the tragedy of others and agrees to listen to the cry of the victims, to engage in the performances of the Palestinians who survived the horrific event that he too is responsible for. When the void fades, that is, when the witness retrieves his memory and knowledge regarding the events that traumatized him, his testimony is no longer required. It is at this point that the witness becomes redundant and the film ends.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The cinematic text *Waltz With Bashir*, like many media artifacts, pinpoints the problem as well as the challenge to bearing witness to traumatic events. On the one hand, the media are considered to be absolute and unmoved by horror and suffering. They can even be accused of doing an injustice to experiences of suffering by rendering them mundane, thus creating indifference rather than empathy. On the other hand, it is precisely media artifacts that invoke horror and pain all the more urgently, and hence it is only *in* and *by* the media that a traumatic event can be heard, witnessed and expressed in a way that will do justice to it.

The witnessing text under investigation can be regarded, I suggested, as a metaphorical witness stand on which Israeli soldiers who have participated in the horrific events of the Lebanon War, notably, Ari Folman the director of the film, step up and *perform* their pain and cries. However, as I demonstrated, Folman, the key witness who takes this role on himself, simultaneously commits himself to others (to the Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, whose suffering he witnessed) and gives himself and his testimony over to others (to the public, to whom he address his utterances). In other words, for Folman this act of stepping up to the witness stand, i.e., being present at the events and then *performing* his

traumatic experiences to others, is not intended merely to recount what went on during the war and particularly in the camps of Shabra and Shatila but also to appeal to his potential audiences and transform them.

By framing the witness to a traumatic event as *a performer* of an excess of an event which has transformed him, rather than a conduit for transferring (exclusive) knowledge to the uninformed I underscored the communicative dimension of witnessing by studying this undertaking as a process, an ongoing interplay between speakers and hearers who undergo assorted mutual transformations *in* and *by* this action. I suggested that by performing the excess of a transformative event, the witness calls upon the audience to participate in the performance, to shed the raiment of the observer and turn into performers who re-enact the painful event that changed them.

By highlighting the performance dimension in witnessing, I tried to demonstrate that what is commonly viewed as an obvious shortcoming of witnessing, namely the inability to “know” the event and hence represent it as knowledge to a removed audience, is precisely what makes this undertaking so significant. In fact, I claimed that the oft-cited lacuna between seeing and saying, experience and knowledge, and presence and absence, does not constitute a flaw of witnessing, but rather accentuates the potential and irreplaceability of this practice.

## NOTES

1. The first Lebanon War began in June 1982 when Israel Defense Forces invaded Lebanon. Israel's violent involvement led to the massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps. The Israeli troops stood by, letting the Christian Phalangist militia kill off the Palestinians in the camps.

2. Dupont, J. (2008, May 19). Ari Folman's journey into a heart of darkness. *The New York Times*.

3. This issue will be discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

4. Ari Folman in an interview, *France 24* (English) May 16, 2008.

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