Mapping Memory and Trauma in Contemporary Media: A Survey of Representational Practices

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Abstract

In an era marked by rapid technological change, widespread conflict, and the growing visibility of marginalized narratives, contemporary media has emerged as a critical space for exploring memory and trauma. This paper surveys the evolving representational practices across diverse media platforms film, television, digital art, interactive installations, and social media that engage with both individual and collective experiences of trauma. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from trauma theory, memory studies, and media analysis, the paper investigates how media forms depict painful histories and emotional wounds through fragmented narratives, nonlinear storytelling, visual metaphors, and immersive environments. Representing trauma and memory in media is not merely a technical or aesthetic challenge, it is deeply ethical and political. The paper explores how various works use silence, absence, and disruption to signify trauma, while others rely on interactivity and audience participation to reconstruct collective memory. In doing so, these representations often blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction, public and private, and personal pain and historical reckoning. The study also examines how audiences respond to traumatic representations, considering the impact on education, activism, and healing. At the same time, it raises questions about ethical responsibility, potential retraumatization, and the commodification of suffering. Through case studies including films like *Waltz with Bashir*, digital memorials, and social media campaigns, this paper identifies patterns and innovations in how trauma is communicated, contested, and commemorated. Ultimately, this paper argues that contemporary media plays a vital role in shaping cultural memory and mediating trauma. By tracing key trends and representational strategies, the study offers insight into the transformative power and limitations of media in capturing the complexities of human suffering and remembrance.

Keywords: Memory, Trauma, Representation, Contemporary Media, Visual Culture, Digital Narratives, Ethics of Representation, Collective Memory, Aesthetic Practices, Participatory Media.

Article Number: SCHORES-JSSH-03-002
SchoRes Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
Volume 3, Issue 1, june 2026
Date Published: 15 July 2026
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www.schores.org

1. Introduction

In today's globally connected and media-saturated world, the representation of memory and trauma has become central to how individuals and societies engage with the past. Whether through films that revisit historical atrocities, television dramas that portray personal loss, or social media campaigns that spotlight lived experiences of violence and displacement, contemporary media has become a powerful platform for expressing and confronting traumatic events. These representations not only help preserve collective memory but also provide space for marginalized voices and silenced histories to emerge (Alexander et al., 2004; Garde-Hansen, 2011). As such, media does more than reflect trauma it actively shapes how it is remembered, narrated, and emotionally processed (Caruth, 2016; LaCapra, 2014).

The intersection of media, memory, and trauma has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the aftermath of large-scale global events such as wars, genocides, terrorist attacks, and environmental disasters. In the 21st century, digital technologies have further transformed how trauma is visualized and remembered. Interactive media, virtual reality, and online archives now allow audiences to engage with traumatic content in more participatory and immersive ways (Jiang, 2025; Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading, 2009), raising new ethical and aesthetic questions. These evolving forms of engagement raise new ethical and aesthetic questions, particularly around the emotional impact and authenticity of mediated experiences (Chouliaraki, 2013; Ahmed, 2013). At the same time, concerns persist about the commodification of suffering and the risk of retraumatization through repeated exposure to disturbing imagery (Nora, 1989; Kilbourn, 2013)

This paper explores how contemporary media represents memory and trauma through various aesthetic, narrative, and technological practices. It draws from trauma studies, media theory, and cultural memory scholarship to analyze how media both challenges and reinforces dominant historical narratives. Section 2 introduces the theoretical frameworks around memory and trauma. Section 3 examines the forms and techniques used to portray trauma across media. Section 4 presents case studies illustrating these practices. Section 5 discusses ethical and aesthetic dilemmas in representation. Section 6 evaluates audience impact and cultural reception. Section 7 concludes by summarizing the evolving role of media in shaping memory and trauma narratives.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Memory and Trauma in Media

Understanding how memory and trauma are represented in contemporary media requires grounding in key theoretical perspectives from cultural studies, psychology, history, and media theory. These frameworks help explain not only how trauma is experienced and remembered but also how it is communicated and visualized across different platforms.

2.1. Trauma and Cultural Memory

Trauma is often defined as an overwhelming experience that disrupts normal psychological functioning and resists coherent narration. Caruth argues that trauma "is not fully grasped as it occurs" and returns later in the form of flashbacks or nightmares, indicating its fragmented and delayed nature (Caruth, 1996). In media representation, this is often mirrored through non-linear storytelling, repetition, visual disruption, and silence techniques that symbolize the unspeakability of trauma (Folman, 2012; LaCapra, 2014). Cultural memory, as refers to shared memories that are preserved through cultural forms such as rituals, texts, and images. Media plays a crucial role in shaping this collective remembrance by choosing which events are visualised, whose voices are amplified, and how stories are framed. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" is particularly relevant, describing the intergenerational transmission of trauma through photographs, narratives, and media artefacts, especially among descendants of Holocaust survivors.

2.2. Representation and the Ethics of Visualizing Trauma

Representing trauma is not just a narrative challenge but also an ethical imperative. LaCapra (2014) distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” trauma the former potentially reopens wounds through compulsive repetition, while the latter aims for a critical engagement that leads to integration and healing. This ethical dimension is crucial in media where affective techniques can both invite empathy and risk retraumatization or spectacle (Chouliaraki, 2013; Ahmed, 2013).

Medium-specific strategies for representing trauma reveal how different forms carry different affective and ideological weight. For example, in *Waltz with Bashir*, animation is used not to trivialize memory but to underline its surreal and fragmented nature (Folman, 2012). Similarly, digital platforms often allow users to interact with trauma narratives through hashtags, comments, or participatory storytelling, shaping a dispersed and affective network of memory (Zappavigna, 2015; Jiang, 2025). These representations are far from neutral they shape who is portrayed as a victim, what forms of grief are legitimized, and which historical events are remembered or marginalized (Alexander et al., 2004; Uwode, 2020).

2.3. Media as a Memory Machine

Media is often theorized as a “memory machine” a term that captures its capacity to store, transmit, and transform personal and collective memory (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Digital archives, video platforms, and social media channels now serve as repositories of traumatic testimony and historical record. Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading (2009) describe this shift as the emergence of "digital memory," where media is no longer a mere medium of storage but a dynamic environment of memory circulation.

However, this expansion brings challenges. The overwhelming volume and ubiquity of traumatic content online may lead to desensitization or memory fatigue (Kilbourn, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2013). Moreover, the ease of sharing and remixing content raises concerns about decontextualization and the ethical responsibility of digital spectators. As (LaCapra, 2014) suggests, the medium itself can shape whether memory supports reflective engagement or uncritical repetition.

Together, these theoretical foundations demonstrate that media is not a passive container but an active agent in the construction, contestation, and transformation of memory and trauma. The following section builds upon these perspectives by analyzing specific representational techniques across film, television, and digital platforms.

3. Media Forms and Techniques in Representing Trauma

Contemporary media uses a range of aesthetic and narrative strategies to represent trauma and memory. These strategies vary across platforms such as film, television, digital art, and social media but share common techniques that aim to visualize disruption, emotional fragmentation, and historical rupture. This section explores how different media forms convey traumatic experiences through distinctive modes of representation.

3.1. Film and Television

Film and television have long served as powerful vehicles for exploring trauma, often relying on cinematic devices that reflect psychological disorientation. Flashbacks, jump cuts, dream sequences, and non-linear timelines are frequently used to mirror the fractured nature of traumatic memory (Kilbourn, 2013). For example, (*Waltz with Bashir*, 2008) employs animation to depict the repressed memories of a soldier during the Lebanon War, blending surreal visuals with documentary interviews. Similarly, *When They See Us* (Uwode, 2020) recreates the Central Park Five case to highlight institutional violence and racial trauma, using close-up shots, prolonged silences, and a focus on emotional detail to evoke viewer empathy. Cinematic techniques such as slow motion, dissonant sound design, and deliberate gaps in the narrative allow filmmakers to suggest the ineffable quality

of trauma the parts that remain unspoken or unremembered. These choices invite the audience to not just witness but *feel* the disorientation and emotional burden that trauma imposes.

3.2. Digital and Interactive Media

Digital and interactive platforms offer new possibilities for trauma representation, particularly through non-linear navigation and audience agency. Virtual reality (VR) experiences like *Clouds Over*, which places viewers inside a Syrian refugee camp, enable immersive engagement with traumatic contexts (Jiang, 2025). Interactive documentaries and web-based narratives allow users to explore stories from multiple angles, simulating the fragmented and unpredictable nature of memory. These platforms also support participatory storytelling, where individuals can upload personal testimonies, photos, or digital artefacts. This democratizes memory-making and fosters collective remembrance, particularly for communities whose histories have been marginalized. However, the immersive quality of digital media also raises ethical questions about emotional manipulation and desensitization (Chouliaraki, 2013).

3.3. Social Media and Participatory Archives

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have emerged as critical spaces for expressing trauma in real-time. Hashtag movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #HolocaustEducation use visual storytelling, testimony (Zappavigna, 2015), and user-generated content to document and memorialise suffering. These platforms function as participatory archives, where trauma is recorded not by institutions but by individuals and communities. Short-form videos, memes, and captioned images can condense complex experiences into digestible formats that circulate widely. While this enhances visibility and engagement, it may also risk trivialization or oversimplification. Still, social media offers immediacy and intimacy, giving voice to personal and collective wounds often ignored by mainstream narratives.

Table 1: Representational Techniques Across Media Forms

Media Form	Common Techniques	Example Works
Film/TV	Flashbacks, silence, montage, slow motion	*Waltz with Bashir*, *When They See Us*
Digital/VR	Immersive storytelling, fragmented navigation	*Clouds Over Sidra*, interactive websites
Social Media	Hashtags, user testimony, visual micro-narratives	#MeToo, #HolocaustEducation on TikTok

Through these media-specific strategies, trauma is made visible in ways that words alone cannot capture.

4. Case Studies in Contemporary Representations

To understand how memory and trauma are represented in practice, this section examines selected case studies across film, digital art, and social media. These examples illustrate the diverse strategies employed to evoke, narrate, and share trauma, highlighting both the strengths and complexities of contemporary media as a space for cultural remembrance.

4.1. Waltz with Bashir *(2008)*

Ari Folman's animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* is a seminal example of how trauma can be explored through non-traditional visual forms (Folman, 2012). The film reconstructs the filmmaker's suppressed memories of his role in the 1982 Lebanon War. Through surreal animation, disjointed timelines, and a dream-like atmosphere, the film visualizes psychological trauma as elusive, disoriented, and often buried in the subconscious. The sudden transition to real archival footage at the film's end serves as a powerful rupture, grounding the abstract trauma in historical reality and shocking the audience into moral confrontation.

4.2. When They See Us *(2019)*

Ava DuVernay's miniseries *When They See Us* dramatizes the wrongful conviction of five Black teenagers in the Central Park Jogger case. The show utilizes a hyper-personal narrative style, focusing on the emotional landscapes of the accused and their families. The cinematography employs claustrophobic framing, stark lighting, and intimate camera angles to immerse viewers in the fear, confusion, and injustice experienced by the boys. The series not only portrays personal trauma but also comments on systemic racial violence, turning a historical event into a national memory project (Alexander et al., 2004).

4.3. Clouds Over Sidra *(2015)*

Commissioned by the United Nations, *Clouds Over Sidra* is a virtual reality experience that places viewers inside the daily life of a 12-year-old Syrian girl living in a refugee camp in Jordan. The 360-degree immersive environment creates a visceral sense of presence, allowing users to feel spatially and emotionally connected to Sidra's world. This intimacy fosters empathy and global awareness, making the trauma of displacement more relatable and humanized. The experience demonstrates how new media technologies can bridge the emotional distance often associated with global crises (Chouliaraki, 2013).

4.4. TikTok and Holocaust Memory

Recent years have seen the rise of Holocaust memory on platforms like TikTok, where young users share stories of survivors, re-enact historical scenes, or create short videos inspired by Jewish history and heritage. While some efforts are educational and deeply respectful, others have faced criticism for being reductive or inappropriate. Nonetheless, this trend illustrates how digital natives are engaging with historical trauma in new formats, reshaping memory through memes, lip-syncs, and visual storytelling. It also highlights the need for critical media literacy when dealing with sensitive historical content (Garde-Hansen, 2011).

4.5. #MeToo and Visual Testimony

The #MeToo movement offers a compelling case of trauma representation in participatory media. Across platforms, survivors of sexual violence have shared their stories sometimes in words, other times through symbolic images or anonymous posts. The movement turned personal pain into collective testimony, using hashtags to connect experiences and build solidarity. Visuals such as hand-drawn illustrations, protest photos, and survivor portraits helped convey emotions that words often could not (Zappavigna, 2015). This form of representation has been instrumental in breaking silence, challenging power structures, and reconfiguring memory around gender-based trauma. These case studies reveal how contemporary media does not just reflect trauma it actively constructs it, giving shape and meaning to suffering through visual, narrative, and technological means.

5. Ethical and Aesthetic Challenges in Representation

Representing trauma in media is not a neutral act it involves complex ethical considerations and aesthetic decisions that shape how suffering is perceived, understood, and remembered. This section explores the moral responsibilities of creators, the risks of misrepresentation, and the ongoing debate between emotional impact and exploitation in traumatic storytelling.

5.1. The Ethics of Bearing Witness

One of the central ethical dilemmas in trauma representation concerns the right to narrate. Who is allowed to tell the story of a traumatic event? What responsibilities do filmmakers, artists, or influencers have when depicting the pain of others? Dominick (LaCapra, 2001) cautions against the "aestheticisation" of trauma, where suffering is stylized in ways that distance or distort its gravity. The act of bearing witness, especially on behalf of others, requires sensitivity, contextual depth, and an ethical commitment to truth-telling. In cases where creators are not direct victims, questions arise

about appropriation and authenticity. For example, while *Waltz with Bashir* is a personal narrative, it also includes representations of Palestinian suffering raising concerns about whose trauma is centred and whose is marginalized. Ethical storytelling must therefore consider both the narrative voice and the framing of others' pain.

5.2. Emotional Impact vs. Sensationalism

Visual media, particularly film and digital platforms, often relies on powerful imagery to evoke emotional responses. However, there is a fine line between creating empathy and indulging in spectacle. Excessive repetition of violent scenes, dramatic soundtracks, or graphic images may generate emotional fatigue or desensitization among audiences. Moreover, trauma can be trivialized when it is reduced to a trope, used merely for dramatic effect or commercial success. This tension is especially visible on social media, where traumatic content can go viral, attracting clicks and shares without adequate context. While these platforms can amplify awareness, they can also risk turning trauma into consumable content. Ethical representation requires restraint, framing, and an understanding of the potential consequences on both audiences and those whose stories are being told.

5.3. Navigating Silence, Absence, and Ambiguity

Many scholars argue that trauma is defined by what cannot be said or shown. Representing it, therefore, often involves engaging with silence, absence, or ambiguity rather than explicit content. This poses an aesthetic challenge: how can media convey the invisible wounds of trauma without over-simplifying or erasing them? Techniques such as disrupted timelines, gaps in narrative, minimalist visuals, and symbolic metaphors can communicate trauma's elusive nature while maintaining ethical integrity. For instance, films that show the aftermath of violence rather than the violence itself can foster reflection without exploiting suffering. Digital art and VR experiences can immerse viewers in the *affective atmosphere* of trauma, prompting empathy without re-enacting horror. These methods offer ethical alternatives to spectacle while still evoking powerful emotional engagement.

5.4. Audience Responsibility and Critical Literacy

The ethics of representation also extend to the viewer. Audiences must engage critically with traumatic narratives, recognizing their mediated nature and reflecting on their own role as spectators. This is particularly important in participatory platforms like TikTok or Instagram, where users contribute to or circulate traumatic content. Educators and cultural institutions have a key role in fostering media literacy, ensuring that trauma is approached with care, context, and critical awareness. The representation of trauma in media is thus a deeply layered process, involving careful navigation between expression and exploitation, empathy and spectacle.

6. Impact and Reception

The ways in which audiences receive, interpret, and respond to media representations of trauma play a crucial role in shaping their cultural significance. Whether through catharsis, activism, education, or controversy, the reception of traumatic narratives reveals much about the power of media to affect individuals and societies. This section explores the emotional, social, and political effects of trauma representation in contemporary media.

6.1. Emotional Engagement and Empathy

Media has the capacity to evoke strong emotional responses that can deepen understanding and foster empathy. Films like *When They See Us* and VR experiences such as *Clouds Over Sidra* are often praised for helping viewers "feel" the emotional reality of others' suffering. This emotional engagement can lead to greater solidarity, compassion, and willingness to act, especially in cases involving marginalized or overlooked communities. However, emotional impact is not guaranteed.

Some audiences may become desensitized after repeated exposure to traumatic imagery, while others may resist empathy if the representation challenges their worldviews or implicates them in systemic injustices. Thus, emotional reception is shaped by personal, cultural, and political contexts.

6.2. Collective Memory and Social Awareness

One of the major effects of trauma representation is its contribution to collective memory. Through film, digital art, or social media, traumatic events are archived, revisited, and interpreted by new generations. Campaigns like #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter have used digital platforms to build collective narratives around pain, survival, and justice, significantly influencing public discourse and policy debates. These narratives also provide tools for education, especially in contexts where formal institutions have failed to address historical wrongs. For example, online Holocaust testimonies or films about colonization can challenge dominant historical narratives and open space for alternative forms of remembrance.

6.3. Activism and Social Change

Trauma representation in media is often a catalyst for activism. The global spread of visual evidence from protest videos to survivor testimonies can generate public outrage, build momentum for social movements, and hold institutions accountable. For example, the viral circulation of police brutality videos has brought systemic racism into international focus, leading to protests and policy debates. Artistic representations also serve as forms of resistance, allowing oppressed communities to reclaim their narratives and assert visibility. Digital storytelling platforms and community archives enable grassroots participation in memory-making, turning trauma into a basis for empowerment and transformation.

6.4. Risks of Retraumatization and Misinterpretation

While trauma representation can educate and inspire, it also carries risks. Survivors who encounter triggering content may experience retraumatization, especially when representations are graphic, unexpected, or disrespectful. Media producers must consider content warnings, framing, and sensitivity when addressing such material. Moreover, misinterpretation or misuse of traumatic narratives can lead to harmful consequences. Simplified depictions of complex histories, aestheticisation without context, or sensationalized content can distort memory and perpetuate misinformation. The reception of trauma in media is thus not only emotional and social but also deeply political. So the impact of trauma representation is shaped by how it resonates with audiences, how it circulates across platforms, and how it contributes to broader cultural, educational, and political processes.

7. Conclusion

The representation of memory and trauma in contemporary media is a dynamic, multifaceted process that shapes how societies remember, grieve, and make sense of collective and personal suffering. Across film, digital platforms, and social media, artists, activists, and everyday users employ narrative and visual strategies to express pain, bear witness, and reclaim agency. These representations serve not only as acts of storytelling but also as powerful interventions in cultural memory and public discourse. This paper has shown that trauma, with its inherent fragmentation and emotional weight, demands representational techniques that go beyond conventional linear storytelling. Media forms such as *Waltz with Bashir*, *When They See Us*, and immersive VR experiences like *Clouds Over Sidra* demonstrate how memory can be shaped through non-linearity, visual metaphors, and participatory formats. Moreover, platforms like TikTok and Twitter have decentralized the production of memory, enabling more diverse voices to participate in the construction and circulation of trauma narratives. At the same time, these representations raise critical ethical and aesthetic questions. The responsibility of storytellers to avoid exploitation, the challenge of representing the unpresentable, and the emotional burden placed on audiences are key

concerns in trauma media. The line between evoking empathy and sensationalizing pain is a delicate one, and media creators must navigate it with care and consciousness. Importantly, trauma representation is not just about the past it is deeply tied to present-day struggles for justice, recognition, and healing. Whether in the form of protest art, digital archives, or community testimony, these narratives contribute to ongoing efforts to confront historical injustices and imagine more inclusive futures. As media continues to evolve, so too will the modes of remembering and witnessing trauma. Future research and practice must continue to examine how emerging technologies, changing audience dynamics, and shifting cultural norms influence the ethics, aesthetics, and impact of representing trauma in the digital age.

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