INTRODUCTION

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“To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 1995: 4–5).
“Representation is cognition” (Davis 2001: 5).
“This response, this response-ability, is what I wish to call…conscience in its social form” (Des Pres 1976: 46).

Introduction

It is surely a truism that the contribution of art to the constitution, integration and comprehension of traumatic historical events has yet to be sufficiently acknowledged, articulated or realized. In Legacies and Ambiguities: Postwar Fiction and Culture in West Germany and Japan, for example, Ernestine Schlant observes that

[p]oliticians and political scientists, economists, journalists, opinion makers, and poll takers all form their conclusions according to some ‘objective’ criteria, but rarely, if ever, is literature consulted. Yet literature is the seismograph of a people’s dreams and nightmares, hopes and apprehensions…literary truth often goes deeper than political or economic analysis, and it reflects the conditions and values of the society under which it was created (Schlant 1991: 1).

Historians could arguably be added to Schlant’s list of those who, all too often, fail to “consult” literature—or film for that matter—in producing their narratives of traumatic events and experiences. In fact, the undervaluation and neglect of artistic works by historians, political scientists, economists, journalists etc. help explain why so many constitutive elements of the Asia Pacific War (e.g., the Nanjing atrocities, ‘comfort women’, Hiroshima) remain controversial and insufficiently fathomed to this day.

According to Walter Davis, traumatic events and experiences must be constituted before they can be assimilated, integrated and understood (Davis 2003: 142). In which case, what constituent elements of trauma are ‘missing’ or under-represented in conventional historical
accounts? This question cuts to the heart of the matter, because what is excluded from public memory and consciousness—primary affects, embodied, individualized experience, psychodynamics, contingency, ideological critique—can be as significant, if not more so, than what is included. Over-reliance on ‘objective’ investigation, logic and rational analysis of carefully vetted ‘historical facts’ often results in the traumatic stories of the past being only partially told.

Contemporary scholars such as Dominick LaCapra, John Dower and Walter Davis insist that emotion is integral to the traumatic historical experience and its understanding. Dower, for instance, writes that vengeance and racial hatred were powerful sentiments that shaped the conduct of the war on both sides, and to pretend otherwise is dishonest…. Sheer visceral hatred drives people at war every bit as much as valor, every bit as much as rationality, every bit as much as patriotism, loyalty, or sense of duty (Dower 1996: 86).

Drawing upon their formidable powers of intuition and imagination to create potent, affect-charged forms and images of extreme historical violence, psychological damage and ideological contradiction, artists enable their audiences to virtually engage, internalize, ‘know’ and respond to trauma in concrete, human terms.

Much of importance about the War has been systematically suppressed, ignored, denied, distorted, avoided, naturalized, neutralized, silenced and rendered ‘taboo’ in public, national and international discourse. Serious artists—both survivor-narrators and those with no direct experience of the deadly conflict at home or abroad—use not only language, but also image to help constitute dissociated and marginalized historical realities and, in so doing, make it possible for them to be recognized, worked over, worked through, comprehended and responded to. Such artistic representations of the brutal, disavowed actualities of the belligerent past, moreover, have profound ramifications for contemporary conceptualizations of past, current and future identity, politics and action. In this sense, art serves as the “conscience of its community” (Davis 2007: 7). With the aforementioned issues, dynamics and interrelationships in mind, we have entitled this volume Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film.