“Is there a relation between trauma and pedagogy?” asks Shoshana Felman. “Can trauma instruct pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma?”1 The affirmative response anticipated by her questions takes the form of an essay, framed as a “life-testimony,” about her experience of teaching a graduate course on literature and testimony. Felman describes how towards the end of the course, a screening of a videotaped Holocaust testimony unexpectedly precipitated a “trauma” or “crisis” in her students which “unwittingly enacted” the class’s subject-matter, and had to be contained and reintegrated “in a transformed frame of meaning” through reflection, discussion and writing or “testimony.” One of the lessons she draws from this experience is pedagogical: “teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught.”2

When I first read Felman’s essay, as a final-year undergraduate contemplating the possibility of future graduate study and teaching, I found some of her conclusions troubling, if not downright alarming. I was disturbed by the parallels she draws between the role of the teacher and the psychoanalyst, and doubted that graduate research would equip me to deal with the fallout of a “crisis” of the kind she describes. More fundamentally, I wondered whether educators have a right, let alone a responsibility, to actively seek to access such crises or traumas in the classroom, and what impact this might have upon the relationship of trust between student and teacher. On more than one
level, Felman’s argument seemed to challenge traditional conceptions of pedagogical ethics. Rereading the essay eight years on, having taught courses on Holocaust-related material for three years, I retain some of my initial reservations, but find myself more receptive to her claim that the encounter between student, teacher, and text must unsettle and disorientate in order to transform. More forcefully than many other texts, Holocaust representations call into question students’ and teachers’ preexisting conceptual frameworks, shaking our assumptions about the ways in which knowledge is constructed and transmitted and compelling us to reconsider the relationship between affect and analysis as well as the ethical and pedagogical value of each.

This essay explores some of the specific challenges involved in teaching filmic representations of the Holocaust, focusing in particular on Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955) and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). It draws on my experience of teaching an MA course on history and memory in French cinema in the Centre for Film Studies at Queen Mary, University of London. This experience is limited and the essay does not purport to offer a model of exemplary practice. More modestly, it suggests ways in which such films might be approached in class and reflects on questions that have arisen in this context. It is revealing that the “crisis” described by Felman erupted on the first occasion when her students were confronted with visually-mediated, as opposed to literary, testimony. The apparent capacity of visual representations to make historical events more real, tangible, and immediately accessible to students than written ones, particularly in an increasingly image-saturated and visually-literate culture, may account in part for the regularity with which Holocaust educators have recourse to visual resources. A significant proportion of the growing number of courses on the Holocaust in UK universities involve the study of films of various kinds. Relatively few, however, accord them the status of primary object of study; films or film excerpts are often incorporated as sources of information or illustration, as supplements, for example, to historical accounts or literary testimonies. Judith Doneson is critical of what she perceives as a tendency to misuse films as “authentic representations” in such contexts, arguing that they should properly be used instead “to understand the process and function of recreating history through film.” Lamenting the rarity of syllabi focusing