Across a broad range of engagements with Goya’s work, the Disasters are understood today as a powerful exercise in visual testimony, an attempt to bear witness to the truth of war in a series of images that uncannily anticipate the modern photojournalism of armed conflict. This paper aims to reshape this common understanding of Goya’s work by arguing that the lasting legacy of The Disasters of War is not so much its ostensibly straightforward, unflinching, quasi-documentary representation of war’s horrors as it is the artistic complexity of the artist’s graphical and lexical meditations on his subject-matter. Drawing on philosophical aesthetics and the phenomenology of the visual arts, Prof. Iarocci develops an account of Goya’s prints as examples of aesthetic witnessing, a paradoxical form of testimony that aims to convey urgent truths while at the same time foregrounding art’s fundamental untruth; that is, its illusion, its artifice, and its remove from the real world. In turn, this quasi-modernist turn points to the broader context of late eighteenth-century aesthetics from which Goya’s art emerged.

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