

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Vulnerability Aesthetics: The Sublime

Hello, I am Saradindu Bhattacharya from the Department of English, the University of Hyderabad. Today we are going to look at the aesthetics of vulnerability via the category of the sublime. The sublime derives from the Latin term *sublimis*, meaning sub, up to, and *limen* or *limus*, the upper threshold of a door or the limit of the boundary of an object. Literally this means something that is high, elevated or lofty. So the term “sublime” in its literal sense encompasses meanings of size, dimension as well as that of limits, boundaries. These meanings were metaphorized by the 3rd century Greek philosopher Longinus when he defined the sublime in art and literature as an expression in language of things that inspire awe, wonder and admiration.

So, he spoke about the sublime in terms of the very specific aesthetic or literary forms of using language on a scale that is different from and better than ordinary language. In the world of nature, the sublime is discovered through encounters with the fearsome and unknown elements of our environment. For example, sea storms, tempests, volcanic eruptions, avalanches, those elements that inspire fear and terror in our hearts and which somehow challenge the human powers of comprehension. This particular idea of locating the sublime in the world of nature was theorized very significantly in the middle of the 18th century by somebody called Edmund Burke, who described the effect of the sublime as delightful horror arising from objects and events in the world of nature that excite ideas of pain and danger.

So for Burke then, there were twin and seemingly contradictory impulses involved in creating the sublime effect, both of pain and pleasure, of delight and horror, of fear as well as fascination. The romantic tradition in Europe as we know, focused greatly on the inner psychological dimensions of human experience rather than on outer material objective reality of the world. And this is something that, then, drew attention of literary artists and theorists of the time to thinking about the sublime, not in terms of an inherent formal quality of some natural phenomenon or object, but as a subjective experience of responding to natural elements that make us aware of the limits of our capacity to comprehend and control. In this context, we might want to refer to Immanuel Kant, who

said that the sublime represents an imaginative excess and is not to be considered synonymous with the beautiful. In fact, what is considered traditionally beautiful is usually not what generates a sense of sublime.

The sublime emerges, as I said, from these potentially catastrophic elements of nature. And it is to be found, according to Kant, in a formless object whose enormity or obscurity becomes the subject of artistic representation. So, one important takeaway from the romantic theories of sublime is that it is available to us in a mediated form, in a form that is artistic. It is not available to us in some kind of spontaneous or organic, unmediated fashion. So, the sublime as an aesthetic category conveys the sensation of both pleasure and unsettlement. That is, the outcome of being confronted with what is unfathomable to our senses and to our imaginative capabilities.

If you look at the two paintings that are put up on the slides, you see that “An Avalanche in the Alps” or “Vesuvius in Eruption” both actually figure and frame elements in the world of nature that are potentially destructive, catastrophic. And in the foreground, you see there are these minuscule human figures, which are almost easy to miss. And this contrast, even in terms of size, is what generates the aesthetic sublime in this particular form of painting. Where you understand that it is the relative insignificance, the complete incomprehensibility of such momentous, cataclysmic events in the world of nature that humans are confronted with.

And this experience is then rendered available to us, the audience, in the form of a painting. So, these paintings then instantiate the romantic theories of sublime in terms of making us confront elements in the world of nature that are beyond our definition, that are beyond our comprehensive abilities, abilities to comprehend them. In the modern age, the aesthetic category of the sublime also acquires certain ethical and political connotations. It becomes more widely applicable, not just to elements in the world of nature, the obscure or the exotic elements of the world of nature. But according to Walter Benjamin, for instance, it can be traced in the alienating and disorienting effects experiences of living in modern urban industrialized societies.

So it is a shift in context that we witness when it comes to the aesthetic category of the sublime, that it is no longer only or exclusively located in the world of nature and its catastrophic elements. It is actually also to be located in the man-made world of the early 20th, early 21st century. In this context, we might also remember that the 20th century is of course a period of human civilization which witnesses the two world wars and witnesses violence, atrocity, man-made human violence and atrocity on a scale and of the nature that is unprecedented and therefore that divides our ordinary limits of perception or imagination. In this context, we might want to think about what Gene Ray talks about in relation to memory and the sublime and trauma and the sublime. And he talks about

how the transformative translation of the sublime into the politicized idioms of psychoanalytic trauma is a hallmark of 20th century art and literature.

So, the sublime no longer remains a purely aesthetic category. The psychological aftermath of war and genocide translates into collective secondary trauma that demands as well as devised representation in language. And this is crucial for us to understand that the sublime therefore in the 20th and 21st century talks about experiences that are located in context of violence, terrorism and the trauma that we engender. Lately of course also to do with the trauma that we anticipate in the ways of anthropogenic climate change. And these are the kinds of contexts in which we will locate certain primary texts for illustration of the category of the sublime.

The three texts that I'm going to be looking at are Spiegelman's graphic novels, *Maus*, which is a second-generation Holocaust memoir based on Spiegelman's father's experiences of surviving the Holocaust in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. The second book by Spiegelman that I'll be looking at is *In the Shadow of No Towers*, which is a collection of his journalistic cartoons post 9/11. And the third one that I'm going to be looking at is Craig Perez's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Glacier", which is to do with ecological systems and anthropogenic climate change. So let us now try to think about the sublime in the context of the modern age and look at these texts a little more closely. We understand that the narrativization of traumatic memory requires certain signs that are culturally recognizable.

For instance, the sign of the image, let's say of partition right victims piled on in thousands into the railway carriages that take them across the border. Those archival images of the Indian partition of 1947 become recognizable signs to an entire culture, even though we may not have necessarily gone through or undergone those experiences ourselves. So those are the kinds of signs that traumatic memory requires at a larger collective level. But we must also admit that these signs invoke the immeasurable physical and psychological impact of genocidal violence on human subjects. That on the one hand, these signs are necessary for us to represent and bear witness to historical trauma.

And we also must contend with the fact that they are never quite adequate to the task of fully capturing the experience of horror, of pain, of suffering that the victims underwent. So, in that sense, this particular kind of narration, the requirement for inventing a different kind of language to represent historical trauma takes us to the category of the sublime as an aesthetic, because then we understand that we need some signs, some form of language to talk about trauma. And at the same time, that language is also seen as not being quite adequate to the task of doing so. So, we see that traumatic memory poses a

challenge to narrative representation. It requires a language for its articulation, but it also draws limits to the attention to the limits of that language to capture the unclaimed experience, as Cathy Caruth puts it, of loss and suffering.

So trauma constitutes a category of the sublime in its capacity to overwhelm the human cognitive ability to remember and represent pain. It renders the vulnerable human subject of violence, both identifiable and unfamiliar. Now let us look at the representation of vulnerability itself in very basic physical terms. If you look at the dehumanized, mutilated, broken bodies in the first panel from the graphic novel, *Maus*, you are reminded of the shared vulnerability of humans to raw violence. And yet this image also poses a challenge to a collective understanding of the human as an integral organic determinant unit.

If you look at this pile of corpses, you see that they seem to blur. It's almost like an indistinguishable mass. And this seem to blur our ordinary categorizations or classifications between male and female, human and animal, living and dead, singular and multitudinous. So, in this context, then the dehumanized body poses a challenge to our rational classificatory systems and becomes a crucial element in the reconstruction of traumatic memory as a sublime experience. If you look at this first image from *Maus* very carefully, you see that there is a certain disruption of the normal.

The context in which we encounter this pile of bodies is where Artie, the son of the Holocaust survivor, has already published the first volume of the book and has made significant critical and commercial success. And yet he is troubled, traumatized by this sense of inadequacy, lack, and even guilt about this particular enterprise that he's undertaken. So, it threatens to disrupt the normal setting within which Artie works. So, the vulnerability of the human body itself, of course, has a discursive origin. The cat and mouse imagery that Spiegelman uses derives from the Nazi propaganda of thinking about Jews as vermin.

So this visual literalization of Hitler's racist rhetoric that the Jews are a race, but they are certainly not human: what he uses as the epigraph for this book. This literalization is something that functions as an aesthetic means of bearing witness to genocidal violence, turning human characters into cartoonish mice and cats. But this aesthetic also then represents the discursive process as well as a material outcome of making certain sections of the population vulnerable. At the same time, this form of remembrance is also an acknowledgement of the fundamental lack in our capacity to measure, contain, or comprehend the drama that the Holocaust produces, which is why the artist over here struggles to come to terms with the success of his own enterprise. So, in this, the visual grammar of the text presents traumatic memory as a sublime category, something that

you cannot ever fully comprehend or represent accurately being authentically.

You also have in the second panel from this book, the imaginative mapping of landscapes through icons of genocidal violence that renders the feeling of vulnerability recognizable to the audience, while it also emphasizes the disorienting subjective nature of the perception of that experience. So, if you look at the second panel carefully, you'll find that the ordinary recognizable elements in the natural or built environment, let's say the moon or the sun that rises, or the open road on which this couple finds themselves. These elements in the ordinary recognizable world are suddenly rendered unfamiliar and terrifying through the use of legible visual icons, the swastika as in our insignia being the icon over here. And the marking of the natural landscape with Nazi symbols metaphorically represents the experience of vulnerability as one that overwhelms the character's perception of normal time and space. And it, thus, produces the disorienting effect that is characteristic of the sublime.

So this disorientation, which is a subjective experience is something that is then translated or conveyed communicated through this form of non-realistic metaphoric symbolic visual or pictorial grammar. So that is where the aesthetic of the sublime comes in. It conveys the sense of disorientation without seeking to offer a documentary representation of it. Moving on, we look at also the interruptive, disruptive recurrent impact of traumatic memory on what we consider the normal, the everyday contexts of life. And this trauma is of course recurrent or interruptive in terms of its recall or in terms of its remembering.

It is not available to us in any unmediated form. So, trauma that is uncontainable is then represented in terms of its intrusion into the transgression of the spatial and temporal limits of the event that caused it. And this presents a sublime excess to our capacity to locate it in relation to the normal and the everyday. So, if you look at the third image from *Maus*, the graphic novel, you see that there is an intrusion of the legs of those Auschwitz inmates who were hanged into the everyday space of modern day New York through which the suburbs of New York through which Artie and his father Vladek the Holocaust survivor actually are driving. So we see that that kind of recurrence, that kind of uncontainability of traumatic memory that literally encodes into the frame of the everyday, the normal is something that presents a certain kind of sublime excess to our capacity to locate trauma.

So this dislocation of trauma or the location beyond the event that caused it is something that then becomes the subject of an aesthetic representation, an artistic mode of representation, again, a non-realist or a metaphoric way of representation. And that is what constitutes it as the blank. We see the endless replay of trauma also disrupting the

sense of the normal. And this defies any attempt to establish an absolute distinction between the event and its memory. We see this more specifically in the second graphic novel by Art Spiegelman that I'm going to be talking about and that is *In the Shadow of No Towers* where we see the event of 9/11 is rendered spectacular through its mediation.

What do we mean by this? That there is a certain collective cultural recognition on the part of us, the witnessing audience, as well as those who were eyewitnesses on September 11, 2001 in New York through the circulation and recycling of the signs of trauma. And this circulation or recycling of signs relies on an aesthetics of sublime. The traumatic memory in mediated forms seems to outlive the original event and thus becomes a sublime spectacle. So, this spectacular dimension of fate is something that we see Art Spiegelman represent through the ways in which he visualizes, he uses pictures in order to represent his memory of 9/11. So he uses expressions such as, “don't drag this albatross around my neck and compulsively retell the calamities of September 11 to anyone who would still listen”.

So this is obviously a reference to Coleridge's “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, significantly and interestingly also a text that is to do with encountering the sublime but in the world of nature. And he talks about the encounter with mysterious, unfathomable, terrifying experiences, except that this experience is no longer located out in wild oceans, but in the everyday context of New York, urbanized, developed first world city. So, if you think about this, then the sky is falling, the time standing still or the world coming to an end, or Artie saying, the narrator was saying, “it was awesome”. These expressions then suggest the vulnerability of the eyewitness or the survivor, symptomized by the sense of the disorientation in the ways in which he perceives time and space. We also see in both of these panels from *In the Shadow of No Towers*, the spectral vanishing presence of the twin towers, which is accompanied of course, with the morphing of the panels themselves into the columnar shape of the towers.

So, the panels which constitute the visual grammar of this graphic narrative themselves seem to be transforming into the columnar structure of the towers. So there seems to be a conflation or a confusion between the subject of artistic representation and the form that it takes. So, while the visual content of the panels suggests the erosion of meaning from the ordinary, everyday reality of a New Yorker, the landscape is being familiar because of the presence of the twin towers and becoming uncanny almost when the twin towers are demolished. This form of visual content representation then also renders the experience of witnessing the event of 9-11 beyond comprehension and sublime in its impact. The grammar of the text that reconstructs the memory of that event mimics the form of the now gone towers.

So, in some senses then the towers are both absent and present and therefore they are a spectral presence of sorts. We also observe if you look at the second image from *In the Shadow of No Towers*, you see that the plane in the gutter between the two panels is almost about to hit one of the towers. So,, in this sense then, in this form of pictorial representation, again, something that adopts a more symbolic rather than a literal or a documentary style of representation of trauma, we see in this case, the language of the graphic narrative bears the mark of trauma, reenacting a moment of violence that can neither be fully captured nor ever be forgotten. The graphic narrative therefore generates an aesthetic of the sublime in that the audience's encounter with 9/11 is made possible only through an admission of the endless nature of its traumatic recall. So, this is what I was talking about, the endlessness, the constant relooping or recycling of the signs of trauma and the subjective experience of fear, confusion, loss and grief that eyewitnesses went through is here encoded through a visual grammar of repetition and distortion.

We also see the emergence of an aesthetics of witnessing from narrative engagement with trauma that surpasses the norms of mapping human experiences in the ordinary sense of the term. If you consider also the post 9/11 scenario where the nonstop circulation of videos and photographs still photographs from ground zero, in some sense it's generated a memory of something that no longer existed in a material form and that is the kind of traumatic aftermath, a lingering traumatic aftermath that this form of visual representation also seeks to mimic. The merging of the form with the content, in this particular case, of such remembered experience and the unending uncontainable sublime sense of fear and uncertainty such memory generates signals the vulnerability of those who bear witness to it. So, the eyewitnesses but also a secondary form of witnessing on the part of the readers, you and I. Finally, if we move on to the context of anthropogenic climate change, we see that this is one more recent domain where the aesthetic category of the sublime is of great use to talk about vulnerability.

If you look at the poem that I have referred to, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Glacier" by Craig Santos-Perez, a poem from the pacific island of Guam, you see that there is a certain modification, a certain appropriation of the technique or the romantic tradition of the sublime to represent the world of nature and this is used in order to underscore the impact of human action on ecological systems. In this particular case, we see that vulnerability is something that is charted or defined not in terms of an opposition between humans and the world of nature so the world of the natural environment is not necessarily seen as being completely distinguishable or separable from the human self but it is seen as being somehow shared or linked to the human self. We will look at some basic elements in this particular poem to try and figure out how the sublime as an aesthetic category works over here. So, if you read the poem very carefully, you will see that there are references to what we consider the awe-inspiring elements of nature. There's mention

of keen tides, the lurid inescapable storms, vulnerable humans trying to engineer sea walls against a glacier that already floods their streets.

So we have those kinds of recognizable elements of the world of nature that are potentially catastrophic but what is interesting over here is that there is a certain kind of disproportion in terms of physical size between man and nature in fact in the final image of the poem itself, the final image being the glacier fitting into the warm hands of the human. So, this is a twist on the hyperbolic strategy that the English romantic poets used and that is because instead of being confronted with nature in its massive uncontainable form, you remember the ten thousand daffodils or the huge dark cliffs of Wordsworth's poetry, here we have elemental nature reduced and compressed into a palm-sized object. So, there is a certain kind of disproportion built into this form of imagery and that generates a sense of unfamiliarity, a sense of unease, unsettlement. Our ordinary ways of perceiving nature do not seem to be adequate to the task of representing the effects of human activities on climate itself. Conversely, this final image can also be visually interpreted in terms of suggesting a kind of grotesque magnification of the human body.

So on the other hand, you can also think of the human body itself as becoming grotesquely magnified and this symbolizes perhaps the tremendous impact of our activities on environment. If you think about the hyphenated expression warm-hands, it suggests the relentless inextricable link between global warming and the agents that have caused it, us humans. So, the warm hands then are in some sense as a synecdochic instrument that connect or that make us aware of the impact, the extent of our own activities on the world of nature. So, this disproportion is therefore an inversion of the legacy of the romantic poetic tradition and is used here to convey in terms of physical scale, the immensity of anthropogenic climate change. If you think about the vulnerability of the elements over here, it is not just humans who are vulnerable, even the gigantic glacier itself is vulnerable.

And we are told that there are 200,000 of those glaciers on this planet. And each one of them by extension of theological extension is vulnerable. So this form of visual diminution of the glacier, the warm hands holding it are basically responsible for that kind of diminution for its shrinkage. But we also see that the human hands that hold it that cause it to melt are also helpless in preventing it from melting. So again, our traditional understanding of who is powerful and who is powerless, the human as being the rational agent performing actions on an inert, passive target, which is the nature of the natural world or environment, those kinds of binary categories, which are of course, a legacy of Western enlightenment and civilization, those seem to collapse over here, we are powerful and powerless agent and victim, target and cause those binary categories no longer operate or seem to be applicable, because vulnerability here is it seems seen as

being transitively distributed shared, because humans and animals and glaciers are kin, related to one another, we see that glaciers themselves are carving, and glaciers are involved in knowing what the speaker already knows.

So there is a certain kind of sharing or extension of the organic human body and consciousness with the objective material other of the natural world. And this surpasses our traditional rational understanding of our environment as something that is distinguishable, that is separable from and therefore controllable by human beings. This produces the effect of the sublime and so far as such permeability across the human and the natural both devise the anthropologic, anthropogenic centric logic of classifying and controlling nature, and also points to the shared vulnerability that all of us, the elements in the ecological system as of which we are just one element, all of us share in the face of environmental catastrophe caused by human activities. So, the sublime in the Anthropocene then results from anticipating ecological catastrophe as an impending end to science, remember the science, the ratio of waters flooding the human streets, streets of our own cities. So that particular ecological catastrophe is anticipated and its trauma is anticipated by the use, through the use of science that are already legible to us, but these are signs that we are not in a position to control.

So there is the element of knowledge, but also the element of unfathomability, something that we cannot control. So, this unsettling anxiety characteristic of the sublime effect arises from this form of poetic representation. And it's also then to do with the realization of nature's vulnerability to human agency and human vulnerability to natural elements, all of which is then rendered accessible to us through the use of poetic language. So, in this case, then we see that the sublime as a category twists or modifies the romantic conception of nature as being all powerful. And yet we see that nature's vulnerability is something that is not exclusive to nature itself, it is then transitively shared by the human as well.

So what we have looked at in this particular lesson is forms of vulnerability and the ways in which it can be ease-thick sized through literature, through painting, through poetry, through visual representation in the late 20th and early 21st century. Thank you.