Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction
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Week- 03
Lecture- 05

The Aesthetics of Vulnerability - Discussion

So, we have a for our group discussion on aesthetics and vulnerability, Saurav Jatua, doctoral candidate in the Department of English, Shahim Shaikh, and Shreyasi Banerjee, who will be the post-graduation to the Department of English. Good morning, all of you. We will start with Shreyasi's points first on visceral realism. And the task of this 35-minute session is to examine how best aesthetics can or cannot either way work for representations of vulnerability, especially as most of you have set in your points in situations of, say, extreme danger, extreme violence, extreme injury, and the power of aesthetics to influence our reception of those images, whether it is the Napalm Girl or the images of Goya. So over to you, Shreyasi, now first. The others who are not speaking will mute and remain on camera so that audio interference will be minimized. Over to you, Shreyasi.

Okay, so first of all, I want to introduce what visceral realism is. Now, visceral realism isn't an actual art movement. It's a fictional art movement that was, so it was mentioned first in Roberto Bolaño's novel, The Savage Detectives. It's a fictional art style or literary movement that is supposed to present reality as it is, raw and unfiltered. Now, where does visceral realism play into the idea of vulnerability aesthetics? Susan Sontag mentioned something very interesting in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. She mentions that the use of graphic pictures to convey horrors of war or unrest, both of which are situations where human vulnerability is stretched to its limits. These graphic pictures can either cause the viewer to feel sympathetic, making them feel genuine horror for the person in the photograph or the film. And in certain cases, even the person photographing, because the person has had to be there to see all of this and then photograph all of this in the form of a still picture or in the form of a video. However, what this could do is the exact opposite and desensitize the viewer to such horrors, making the subject of these graphic pictures into a curio or some sort of fascination. Now, this desensitization is something that we are more prone to recently because of the sheer barrage of images and videos that we have been exposed to, especially post-COVID. So, there is now a term called “doom scrolling”, which is basically where you're on your social media feed 24/7. You're scrolling through images, you're scrolling through

news. And while for the first few days, maybe you're really feeling the pain of the person on the other end of the lens, slowly what happens is you get so used to looking at these pictures on your feed or on your just general social media that you tend to distance yourself from it emotionally. And this does the exact opposite of what visceral realism is supposed to do, which is shock you into thinking that, you know, these are human subjects and there are atrocities happening towards them. And on the other hand, you just completely distance yourself from it. So, visceral realism, while it might be a good way to approach vulnerability, instances of extreme human vulnerability, it also possesses the real potential to do the exact opposite. Those are my points.

That's interesting because it also ties in with an earlier argument made by people about compassion fatigue, where after a point, you no longer have it in you, even with the best of intentions, to discover compassion for what's going on, because you simply switch channels, turn the page or shut out the website completely from your bookmarks because you no longer can deal with it. So, it actually, as you said, can be counterproductive more than anything else in drawing attention to conditions of atrocity, which I think is something that Sourav had said as part of his points. Over to you, Sourav.

Yeah, so I was thinking of one point that Shreyasi kind of hinted at that, you know, when we look at the production of these kind of images, or media as part of a larger news system that that enters into our lives, right, so we become kind of become there is a gradual sense of empathy that starts to come. For instance, I can I remember the first days of COVID, like, there were these huge cries of, you know, like, like help, which would, and where people would send money to GPay to somebody affected or something. But then after, after a couple of months, I think that kind of slowly dwindled on because as he was saying, we realized that, okay, you can't go do go on doing this forever, right. And at some point, we have to look for other institutions that can support or be the government order, or in a political sense, the authorities to come in and help their citizens. So, so what I think Shreyasi's point does is it situates the question of vulnerability is through aesthetics within a larger system of governance, not governance, I would say like, like a larger system of news, ecosystem, which works in a society. My, I, how I was thinking about the question of aesthetics and as not an answer, but they could take off from what Shreyasi talks about, because she Sontag's idea of desensitization also, right? So, the fact that these pictures are framed in a particular way, and I remember Shahim earlier once told me that when, when the photographer is taking this picture, they are consciously claiming that picture is also an element of you know, what I want to show. So of course, the affective quality of this picture, of a picture is an in an internet one also, the idea is to shock the viewer to idea is to jerk the, how to put it like, take the year into it was sudden push, okay, you are "you're seeing this now now, now what what do you do?", but the point that probably comes here is that and Shreyasi points it out in a different way the idea of doom scrolling where we are so inundated in now different kinds of, let's say,

quote unquote, “shocking pictures”, per se, I was thinking in terms of more of, of, you know, how it worked in the, let's say, the aesthetics of these pictures within the last century per se, right. And I remember, for example, Vice had this whole series called Pictures that Shook the World, it was called Dark Room or something, and they would have these video essays on certain in individual pictures of the 20th century that would that would shape our perception of the medium. So, so there what I found there and that that is what makes what we're where I situate my argument is that the picture has to all also be contextualized. The problem with framing the picture within a photographic medium completely is to also be contextualized the same. The problem is a picture cannot exist without narrative. As I remember in Sir’s class, Sir showed us the picture of the falling man, right? And it's not a, it's not an instance of historical vulnerability, but about an everyday, like a man falling from a tower without any reason with if you look at it, but the such a seemingly small picture could have had such an influence that it was taken up from the records of the 9/11 archives. So that the point that that that I would then come to end my argument is that then where you know, if we take Shreyasi’s point of desensitization and so much so many pictures and then what I'm saying is, you know, the narrative of the picture has to stay then how does, how do we, is there a correct way to frame on that of these pictures?

Yeah, and the question of context is crucial because the photographer might say that he or she shot it by accident, but the fact that there was a camera present itself is a framing mechanism that Nick Ut who just happened to be there with a camera. The camera is part of the semiotics of meaning production that the camera was there is part of the organization methodology as one critic noted that, you know, so the shot may have been accidental, but the presence of the camera was itself part of the composition. But I'll now turn this over to Shahim to respond to Shahim and Saurav and add something of your own.

Yeah, so Shreyasi talked about visceral realism. And the thing about visceral realism, and this is a debate that has been raging for a while now, is that when we look at something that is violent or disturbing on, on a screen, especially in films or in documentaries, at what point do we say that what we are showing is in order to convey the disturbing nature of something? And at what point does it become an endors- and almost an, you know, like an inadvertent endorsement of what's being shown? This is something that a debate that has popped up a lot in talking about graphic depictions of rape on film, where it's like, at what point are you trying to show real? Are you trying to be sympathetic to the victim? And at what point are you just endorsing an act, or rather showing an act, and then making it almost something that a viewer will look at? And let's just say, not be able to differentiate between what's being shown and the fact that what is being shown is disturbing, and the fact that it's wrong and the fact that it's visceral. And Shreyasi talks about this, Saurav talks about photography. And that would be an interesting segue into

my discussion, which is to do with paintings, because photography essentially is, we have always heard this idea that photography is truth. But 200 years of this medium has taught us that it's anything but. All photographs are framed. Every photograph before the point of a photograph always is to decide what you will exclude from it. And what then the very act of deciding what you're excluding from it then determines how you're going to include what you're going to include. ll photographs are in some fashion staged, even the ones which are very honest. And so, but even there, we can always say that at least the camera captured what was in front of it. And to some extent, you can still say that fine, there is some, perhaps some level of truth to it. But when we talk about a painting, a painting is something that is derived entirely from the imagination of the painter. A painting is essentially an act of creation that a painter has done of a certain image that they have in their mind. It has its own narrative. And so the idea that I'm trying to convey here and what I'm trying to get into here is we're talking about aesthetics and vulnerability. And the concept of aesthetics, if you look into the Oxford dictionary, is that aesthetics is described as our appreciation or the methods with which we look at things that are considered beautiful, that are considered of taste, and how we interpret things that way. And so now when we talk about vulnerability and the various things that comprise the scope of this subject, we are talking about things that aren't exactly beautiful, to say the least. And so then, there is already this oxymoronic conflict that how do you say aesthetics and vulnerability? Like at what is the aesthetics of vulnerability? And if we use aesthetics in a historical term, as a historical term, then are we trying to say we are beautifying something that's dangerous? Or are we trying to essentially... So, in the context of a painting, for example, a painter creates something, an image that is in their mind. And through that they are trying to depict a scene of violence, it can be a scene of war, a scene of some sort of conflict. And then what they are doing is they're using their own idea of it. So, a painting is always an interpretation from the moment that it's being painted. In that sense, it's sort of similar to a photograph. But again, at what point if a painting is supposed to be something or any work of art is supposed to be something that we look at in order to consume, and talking about vulnerability, we are talking about a sort of viscerality that makes you look away, that will disturb you and that will affect your sensibility. In that sense, how do we create a work of art? Then do we create a work of art that makes you look away? In which case it would be the paintings of Beksinski, Zietzsław Beksinski, the Polish painter who was working from the mid 20th century. And Beksinski's paintings, he grew up in Poland at a time when the Nazis had virtually wiped off all the Jews who lived in the town that he was growing up in. And then he was growing up in Soviet occupied Poland. Beksinski's paintings offer us a very interesting glimpse at vulnerability in the sense that all his paintings are these haunting surreal dreamscapes, right? With very, with skulls, dead bodies, decaying corpses, animals that don't look like animals, the face of a soldier, a mutilated face of a soldier, but one that you look at and you almost see some sort of grotesque, there's a grotesque beauty to it

perhaps, but that's only because we are looking at it as a painting and we are trying to derive some beauty from it. And, but then Beksinski is one artist who always does make you look away, almost repulses you when you look at a work of art of his. And Beksinski is following in a certain tradition that in the Western canon of art was begun by Goya, because Goya was, especially in his two paintings of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, the second of May 1808 and the third of May 808, shows two depictions of war which had never been portrayed in that fashion in Western art at that point. The second of May 1808 is this carnage of, it's this sequence of a battle scene where horses are running down streets, there are corpses lying around and people are being murdered and you don't know who is, who here is brave, who here is a soldier, who here is, perhaps you don't even know who is a soldier and who is a civilian. And that is what war is. It's chaos. It's not organized. And it's not something that can be nicely framed and put into boxes of, in the midst of violence, there's no way you can tell who's good and who's bad because everyone is engaging in an act of violence. That's what Goya pointed out. And in the second painting that he made is of the following date, when all the rebels and the peasants had, when everyone had been lined up for an execution. And you see this painting where you have these two distinct sides now, where on the one hand, you have the Napoleonic soldiers, organized like automatons, they have their guns pointed out because they are a firing squad and you see almost a robotic mechanism to it. And on the other end of their guns are the dead bodies of soldiers, of these rebels and people just in despair, like a priest clasping his hands to cry for mercy, or perhaps just people in this state of utter despair. And what Goya managed to create here is something that again, definitely qualifies as a work of art, but at the same time, it's not something that for the lack of a better term, perhaps, phrase, perhaps, pulls you in. No, if anything, if you look at it and your immediate response is a sense of discomfort, a sense of which Beksinski does even better.

And so perhaps that's the point at which I think we need to move back to what Shreyasi has also said about the ethics of representing this kind of violence. If for example, like you said, it doesn't pull you in, if it doesn't draw us in, then does it make it easier? Does it make it irrelevant? Does it make it relevant, topical? So, the aesthetics cannot be separated from the ethics of representing extreme violence. And this is a constant debate as Shahim, you, yourself have said, but I'll move this to Shreyasi to speak a little bit about this.

Right, so we were talking about the framing of a picture and whether the picture itself tells a narrative and how far that narrative can go in conveying, you know, whatever kind of reality that it is that you want to convey, how shocking you want the picture to be. So, in this context, since I'm talking about photographs, I thought about two particular photographs. The first one is “Tomoko and Mother in the Bath” by W.

Eugene Smith. Now what W. Eugene Smith has done here is he's made a conscious effort to actually frame the picture like Michelangelo's “Pieta”. And so the contents of the picture are Tomoko's mother, Tomoko Uemura, who is, she was a sufferer of Minamata disease. And so, what W. Eugene Smith and his photographing team did was they worked with Tomoko Uemura and her mother. They moved the entire setup into her bath so that they could frame Tomoko in the bath with her head resting on her mother's lap a la Michelangelo's “Pieta” so that they could get the point across of what Minamata disease was doing, not just to Tomoko, but to several other Japanese people who were in the runoff of the mercury-poisoned waters that was being, so the water was being poisoned by runoff from the Chisso Corporation in Minamata, which is where the name of the disease comes from. So in this case, the framing of the photograph was very consciously done. And it was not just consciously done by the photograph, by the photographing team. It was in collaboration with the sufferer. So, it was in collaboration with the subject of the photograph. And this actually went a long way in helping the sufferers of Minamata disease get compensation get health care from the corporation that had done this to them. On the other hand, you have a picture like “Saigon Execution” by Vosu and Eddie Adams. Now “Saigon Execution” actually won the Pulitzer Prize for I believe, yeah, spot news photography in 1969. So, what the photograph has is it has the execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém. It's an iconic photograph. It is a man in the middle of the streets of Saigon, Nguyễn Văn Lém, with a gun to the side of his head. This is mid execution, so you can actually see the bullet wound exit from the other side of his head. And so here, it was the exact opposite of what happened with “Tomoko and Mother in the Bath”. So, none of them really knew what they were stumbling upon when they stumbled upon the execution. And it's just, I mean, according to the photographers, it was a situation of right place, right time, which in itself is, I mean, it's a phrase that could be debated. But if it wins them the Pulitzer Prize, and it's not consciously, you know, framed, or it's not got something that the photographers were consciously trying to create, then what is it that the ethics of photography as Shahim said, what is it that the ethics of photography really want to convey? Who is the audience? Now, clearly, the photographer in both of these situations were, like both of these photographers, they did create an award-winning photograph, yes. But the intentions behind them were completely different. One of them was a very conscious intention. And the other was something that the photographer just he didn't know he would be there. Now, in the first instance, like with Tomoko, it's quite obvious what like, because there was such collaboration between the photographer and the subject, one could say that the context of the suffering and the context of the person who has been rendered vulnerable is present within the photograph. So. there is more storytelling, one could say there is more both sides of the coin represented in the photograph. Although if you were to look at the photograph without reading up on it, it would be sort of difficult, like, to understand that all of this is happening. But even then, if you look at the photograph without reading most of the context, it's quite obvious that

the photograph has been stylized, it's quite obvious that the photograph has been consciously framed. Now, in the second instance, how much of the subject's authority is there in the photograph is highly debatable, because first of all, the subject didn't live to see the photograph being published. Second of all, immediate family of the subject, in this case, Lém's wife, she did not know that the photograph had been taken, she did not know that the photograph had been published even until the photograph until she saw the photograph on the first page of a newspaper. So how much of the subjects authority, how much of the subject side of the story is being told, because in this photograph, because there is no real stylization of the photograph per se, you don't really know who's in the right, you don't really know who's in the wrong, all you see is a person being executed, you don't know whether the execution happened for, you know, you don't even know whether it was an execution or a murder. Because the way you title these photographs is also very conscious. And the way you title these photographs also has a lot of things to say to the person viewing the photograph. So in terms of the ethics of vulnerability aesthetics, I think the closest way you can achieve something where there is some sort of subject autonomy is if you have the chance to work with the subject, and have a piece of art that shows the dialogue that you had with the subject, because in that case, the person viewing the work of art, even if they don't go through the measures of understanding the context of it all, there's something in the work of art itself that says that yes, there has been a conscious choice made to make the subject's point of view also known, and it's not just trauma point.

Yeah, I think Sourav will have something to say about it, because he has also made this point that the photograph should be a trigger for people, say the audience, to remember, except of course, that the targeted audience may not be the audience you eventually get, given the fact that the photograph circulates endlessly through media circuits, the reception of it. I was thinking of a more anonymized kind of narrative put together from the Killing Fields of Vietnam, the Vietnam Archives, which I think Yale has put up, it just has thumbnail photographs of the people executed with a name and a number. There's no story attached, sometimes there isn't even a name. Those were the people who were killed in the torture camps, but you just get this entire archive of suffering. We know they have been executed, there's no backstory to any of them. In the case of photographs where the executioner and the executed are both visible, that gives you one narrative. In this case, there's an anonymized machine which has done this. Where are the perpetrators? Who were they? That has been anonymized, and when Sourav says it, it forces you to remember, that's interesting. Sourav, over to you and then Shahim.

Yeah, I will respond to Shreyasi with one point I was thinking that regarding the ethics of the medium, of taking a particular photo. I believe that's not always very possible to do this because when we're talking about the collaborative point, which you very rightly pointed out, regarding subject autonomy, which we should have, which photographers

should have, but then we also realize something that, be it photography or as Shahim was talking about paintings, for example, and I think Shahim's point kind of puts us in a chronology of sorts in here because as audience, be it the person viewing Goya's painting in the early 1900s or us being a significant photograph in the 20th century, for example, the underlining aspect is that the role of the audience, per se, because when we talk about aesthetics, as Shahim was pointing out, and you mentioned the definition of the word, the idea of aesthetics also rests on how a particular populace or a particular people will view the photograph or the painting, right? So, and to keep that in mind, the idea of photography specifically is, I feel it, Sir just pointed out the anonymous quality of it. A photo has to be, for the lack of a better word, secretive, I feel. Because if, like, I'm thinking a photo like the Alan Kurdi be for photo, right? Somebody was just there taking the picture of the beach and the boy was just there. Or I think in COVID times, I think when there was this photo from the top of the burning ghats that when they were supposedly dumping the bodies of the patients without any question of identity. So, they are powerful images because there is an anonymous quality of those photos, right? I mean, the photo, as Sir just mentioned, I mean, I think even the Jewish Holocaust illustrates, there are, in most cases, there are no photos, they're just the names and the thumbnails of those who can check. So, but the point that I'm trying to get to is that also our aesthetics of through these mediums also depend on the, you know, affect, just the raw effective quality of it. And this is, through this, I want to go to my second point also, that this creates a particular problem is this because then while we as students and let's say readers of these mediums, they are trying to make an informed choice of these representations of reality. But then what happens to, you know, when these photos win prizes? I mean, this is something that I argued in my points. So, I thought of it because like when a photo like this one wins the best picture of the year award or something like that. So, it's a double-edged sword. Yes, the artistic, the strive to find an artistic quality in a photo like this, as Shahim points out, is an aesthetic jive of the audience of a judging authority. Yes. But then also the photo then becomes an artifact, an aesthetic piece that will be just remembered in years to come as something memorable only without the nad. I feel there is a fear of losing the particular narrative of the photo because as I mentioned my points also, when a photo like this comes out, there is an outrage, there is a reaction, right? For example, we can all safely say the pictures of the Gaza Strip that are coming out, that picture of one bombed hospital has suddenly unnerved the Israeli public relations machine. Now they can't hide anymore. I mean, of course, that is a very good thing. But then the question is then, what the question was then, how for 20 years we are not, we were okay with the conditions of like humanity being imposed there. So, that is the point that the, and beat paintings or photos or films also, they're all trying to at some level, they're progressively trying to narrate better. What Goya did 200 years back with his paintings and then what we are trying to do in a simple, small photo, we all try to put it better through these kind of mediums. So, I think, yeah, at the end of it, I think we

should take care that the narrative of the photo or painting in that case should never be forgotten or not be taken out, because that's where we're going.

I think Sourav has pulled us back towards the ethical dimension of the consumption of visual images. But it also hinges as we all agree on a certain kind of visual literacy that we are trained in. Yours, in particular, being the visually driven generation, you work with emojis and icons and most of your work done on screens is visual oriented. So, that again is a certain kind of training in how we consume, how we make and distribute visual materials. A couple of final remarks from Shahim, please.

Yeah, so one of the interesting things that Shreyasi talked about was the naming of an image or the naming of a work of art. And I think that plays a significant role in how we perceive a work of art. Now, for example, there's this Indian contemporary artist called Vivek Vilasini. Vivek Vilasini made this staged photograph of “The Last Supper”, except he replaced Jesus and his disciples with burka clad women. Now suddenly, and the name of the painting is “Last Supper- Gaza”. Now, as soon as you name a photograph like that, it's not, so now not only are you portraying, this is from 10 years ago. Now you have to remember that a painting when you name it like that, suddenly the word Last Supper has a very different meaning altogether, right? You're not looking at a group of women who are constantly vulnerable to the whims of an occupying force. In the same way, how we name a work of art, I believe is often a major determinant of how we consume that work of art. Beksinski didn't name his paintings. Most of his paintings are unnamed. And that's great because what he was allowing us to do was not look at a painting with a name like “Man Right”, like something grand or it's something that you look, it's a visual work and you look at it and you get what you want from it right there. And in that same sense, during the pandemic, there was this entire movement of people who were taking photographs that were recreations of classical paintings. Holly Bess Kinkaid made this image called “Holly's World”, which is “Christina's World” by Wyeth. But here she's basically, humorously trying to show a woman who is just destroyed at the fact that she can't attend classes. She can't meet her friends. She can't go to the university. At the same time, another one would be, a very similar one would be a woman zooming, where you are taking a painting like “Young Woman Drawing” by Marie-Denise Villers and you're replacing the canvas with an iPad. And now the idea being that that is the only way you can communicate with the world. And a woman zooming gives you that idea so that there's no confusion as to what's being held. So, I believe that when we talk about naming any work of art, we can run into a very interesting conversation as to how does the name of a work of art determine our perception of it. And especially in talking about things, horrific things, things related to genocide, war and dystopia, does the act of naming, and this can be a question that can be raised, does the act of naming then determine how we view the aesthetics of that picture, if we believe there is an aesthetics to begin with?

Also along with naming the point that Sourav made, “award-winning photograph”, New York Times, Kevin Carter's, Nick Ut’s, that is actually the framing of something which is already a frame, the photograph. And that is where the culture studies idea about circuits of consumption play such a big role that they appear at a particular moment, they're distributed through a certain mode, award-winning photographs or this, that or the other, and then consumed in a certain, so which is what I was thinking of in the broader sense when I spoke about visual literacy, that you are aware that you are being drawn in a certain way. For example, if it's a set of texts introduced into the classroom as part of a syllabus or appearing on page three of a newspaper, I was thinking of the point that Shahim made about people mimicking earlier forms, the Hooper painting which was re-inscribed, the girl sitting in the room with the sunlight coming in as opposed to the girl in the open field, those ones, the art of COVID-19 which did their basic parody of several of those and serving a particular purpose showing incarceration of a different kind versus openness. So, the context remains our overarching frame. But I'm glad to see so many ideas. I think we ran out of time actually. So, thank you Shreyasi, Sourav and Shahim, wonderful stuff from production to consumption. And it's been fantastic actually. I really enjoyed myself. Thank you.