

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Week- 03

Lecture- 01

The Aesthetics of Vulnerability - I

We now move on to something more specific. What would be the more appropriate ways of representing, of depicting vulnerability? We have looked at concepts, we have looked at the embedded nature of vulnerability, we have looked at classifications of most vulnerable groups by the United Nations, conditions of shared vulnerability, of historically handed down vulnerability. But how do we talk about it? How do we represent it? What does say, for example, art or literature do when it has to represent vulnerability? Since my own training is in literary studies, the rhetoric or the language of vulnerability is of considerable interest to me. And the ways of representing it, whether in the form of verbal descriptions or visual texts, the discourses employed, the language employed, the aesthetic strategies employed are of considerable interest. We will have a little more detailed discussion on the aesthetics of vulnerability in a later session.

But for now, the key question that I want to address here is, what would be the appropriate way in which we can talk about vulnerability? Now, artists will represent vulnerability of the human kind, of animals, of plants in a certain manner. The example that you can see on your screen is a very well-known painting, Louthembourg, 'An Avalanche in the Alps'. And photographers have over the centuries of photography taken captivating, horrifying, frightening pictures of people, of groups in various degrees and kinds of vulnerability. Some of you will know the famous image of the Napalm Girl, the girl who has been bombed as part of the Vietnam War and the girl on practically on fire running down the road, Nick Ute's famous photograph.

We have disaster images from floods, the tsunami, earthquakes, which periodically appear in our news feeds and on our screens. We have photographers like Margaret Bourke-White whose images from the Buchenwald concentration camp documented survivors, but in the process also documented how Nazi Germany had treated the Jews. So, we also then have literary texts, famous texts like say Charles Dickens talking about working classes, orphans and others, William Blake writing about chimney sweepers and prostitutes and soldiers, Wordsworth writing about discharged soldiers as the soldiers sent back from the army, poetry about older people, unwell people from India and other

parts of the world, all of them concerned with how best do we represent vulnerability. What are the aesthetic modes? Representations of vulnerability are usually employed to evoke sympathy, fear, terror. They talk about or represent the search for safety and security to generate a program of action or to lay a certain ethical foundation as a part of our response towards those who suffer.

So, what I want to emphasize is in all representations of vulnerability, the aesthetics of talking about or representing violent bodies, violated bodies, victim bodies, perpetrator situations, all of them, the aesthetics has a very strong political subtext. Remember what I said about resilience, discussions of vulnerability, most vulnerable groups, resilience and adaptation, the continuum that we have talked about already has a very strong political connotation. So, the aesthetic representation of vulnerability is no different because the aesthetics also foregrounds conditions in which certain humans and non-humans have been rendered vulnerable. This could be governmental indifference, austerity measures, conditions of war, of say the pandemic. All vulnerability aesthetics therefore is the aesthetics with a political subtext, with a political connotation.

Philip James Louthembourg's, 'An Avalanche in the Alps'. which is painted in 1803 is a great example of the traditional aesthetic of the sublime. Nature is overwhelming, large, awe-inspiring and humanity is very tiny, very insignificant, very small, in the presence of nature. If you look at the painting very carefully, the mountains are looming and there is an avalanche coming down the hills and the human creatures are tiny, insignificant and they are moving back in terror. And the entire aesthetic that is generated in us is how pathetic, how tiny, how insignificant humanity is in the presence of nature's power. The avalanche threatens to destroy them and humanity can do nothing to stop it.

They can try to run from it, they can try to hide from it, but the entire painting captures the enormity of nature's power, the enormity of nature's fury to use a very traditional stereotype. Then there is the Margaret Bourke-White picture titled 'The Living Dead in Buchenwald'. It showed a group of very emaciated, very thin survivors in the famous uniform clutching onto barbed wires. This was one of the liberation photographs as in Margaret Bourke-White was the official photographer of the freeing, the liberation of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany's occupied territories. This captured the condition of vulnerability induced by human policy, basically anti-Semitism and Nazis, the Nazis policy towards the Jews.

The Margaret Bourke-White photograph is coterminous or cognate with numerous representations of the Jewish extermination pogrom of the Nazi state and cast in a documentary realist mode. Documentary realism, as the picture depicts or captures or signifies, is raw. It's a direct hit upon your senses, upon your sensibility. There's no

attempt to make symbolic value out of it. There's no attempt to color it, connotate it with something and all that.

Documentary realism mode just delivers it. It's a very stark photograph as you can see, black and white, which is also the correlation between the Nazi forced conditions of uniform among the Jews, the Jewish inmates and the photographic condition itself. Very visibly exhausted, emaciated people clutching barbed wires, hopelessness writ large on their faces. What kind of aesthetic is that? Where is vulnerability in its rawest, in its crudest, most directly appealing mode? Then there is of course the very horrific color picture of Kevin Carter, 1993, of a child stalked by a vulture in Sudan. The child is clearly on the verge of starvation induced death.

And there's a vulture watching, waiting. Carter committed suicide after a time and the picture went on to capture the attention of several million people all over the world. What did it do? It gave us the ultimate vulnerable victim, the child. The child, as theorists have noted, is the ultimate victim, is the perfect victim. And here is an extreme case, even among children, a starving child, a starving child being stalked by a vulture who knows the child is on the verge of death and is following.

Horrible picture. Again, it moves you beyond anything that you can ever imagine. It can move you beyond what you thought you were capable of imagining. So, we have seen two things. Philip James Louthembourg's 'Avalanche in the Alps', which is the sublime representation of vulnerability, which captures human insignificance, the smallness of our lives in the presence of large, massive, natural catastrophes like an avalanche, like the tsunami, like an earthquake.

That's the sublime mode, the sublime mode of talking about, of representing vulnerability. Then there is the realist mode or the documentary realist mode, as I said about Margaret Bourke-White. It captures a sense of vulnerability in very stark ways, in black and white ways. The child about to die due to the lack of food, the burning girl in Napalm-bombed Vietnam, all of those, and of course, the haunted, emaciated expressions on the face of the Jews hanging on to the barbed wire. There's another photograph that you are seeing here, and that is a particular pigeon coated in oil.

This photographic horror, so to speak, or horror photography, depicts the fate of the non-human, the vulnerability of the non-human in human induced climatic conditions, that the oil spill which has polluted Alaska, and this is from Alaska, has made sure that the bird population has been rendered totally, utterly vulnerable. Their territory, their terrain, polluted, contaminated, destroyed, to use the most accurate description I suppose. So that the birds can no longer be safe, their vulnerability enhanced, and that is encoded in the

image of the bird. I would like to now read out briefly a small passage from Charles Dickens's cult novel, *Oliver Twist*, and please note the tone and the rhetoric. I am reading here:

“They walked on, for some time, through the most crowded and densely inhabited part of the town; and then, striking down a narrow street more dirty and miserable than any they had yet passed through, paused to look for the house which was the object of their search.” So, it's a group of people visiting a working class resident, okay? “The houses”, says Dickens, “on either side were high and large, but very old, and tenanted by people of the poorest class: as their neglected appearance would have sufficiently denoted, without the concurrent testimony afforded by the squalid looks of the few men and women who, with folded arms and bodies half doubled, occasionally skulked along.” Look at the description here, “skulked along”, not ‘walked’, “skulked along”, you know, people beaten and ruined by fate, not enough food, not enough clothing and warmth, London, okay? Hopeless and helpless and just barely moving along.

He continues, “a great many of the tenements had shop-fronts; but these were fast closed, and mouldering away; only the upper rooms being inhabited. Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls,” So, the houses were falling down, they've been propped up somehow. “Many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their positions, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine. “

That's one description. The other description from *Bleak House* that you can also see is the kind of slice of life description from *Bleak House*, Dickens again, Charles Dickens again and it captures a family in a house. And there is an illustration there which was by Hablot Knight Browne drawing under the pen name Phiz and it is called “A Visit to the Brickmakers”, an illustration for Dickens's *Bleak House*.

Note the description. What are the things you see? First it is severely overcrowded. Everything is happening in the same space. Somebody is cleaning, somebody is resting, there are clothes to dry hung right there. The man has come back from work and is exhausted.

There is a dog. The materials, the objects if you see have been scattered randomly. There is no place to put all of them and these high society ladies have come visiting and are looking very curiously at how they live. How do they live? How do the poor live? Vulnerability exposed and documented. There is also a very strong sense of patronage, of condescension, of upper-class elite condescension towards the poor. That is one more kind of description.

Now what you are seeing here is a set of very well-known drawings by William Hogarth called 'Beer Street' and 'Gin Lane'. Okay? This is the depiction of two segments of London society, of London culture. Hogarth's pictures have always been extremely powerful but he is making a larger social comment. In Beer Street, the people are genuinely happy. They are poor but they are happy and in Gin Lane they are poor but terribly, terribly unhappy and miserable.

But the larger point that Hogarth makes is important and it is a sort of expansion of the idea of vulnerability itself. The poor are vulnerable because they are poor. We all accept that. And they are also poor because they are very bad habits such as drinking foreign liquor. So, the poor when they are drinking English drinks like beer or ale, they are poor but happy.

When they are poor but drinking gin which was foreign made at that point in time, they are unhappy. So, Hogarth you see has made the larger connection between vulnerability and cultural practices, especially imported cultural practices such as gin drinking. What is the relevance of this? Hogarth is satirizing vulnerability at one point, at one level, but he is also making the larger comment that in many cases the poor do not help their cause, that the poor do a lot of disservice to themselves by behaving like this. Why drink gin? Why can't you drink English drinks? So, critics like Ronald Paulson have argued that Hogarth is making a larger comment about English trade and foreign policy and consumer society. The next set of images are from Igor's, *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks*.

You will recall what I said about the Holodomor, the first starvation of about 6 million Ukrainians due to Stalin's policy, Joseph Stalin's policy of taking away their grains and not allowing access to food grains. This is 1932 and if you look at the images there, there is a depiction of cannibalism, there is a depiction of deserted streets and houses and then there is the image of a silhouetted person with the year 1932 written as like it is a kind of fumes, in the fumes behind it. What does this do? Note that Igor is doing primarily a symbolic representation. The symbol of the disappearing people is the shadowy, insubstantial human person to talk about to depict dissolution. Dissolution because they are dissolving.

So this is symbolic representation of capturing bodies that are collapsing, eroding, lack of food because of lack of food and health has broken down and people are dying, etc. So how does he do it? He shows a body in kind of blurry, shadowy, ghostly form. In the matter of ethics in the face of vulnerability, how do we represent the vulnerable? What would be the ethics of responsibility towards the other? This is a question that many

artists, many critics of art and literary critics have asked. Should there be a certain voyeurism when we depict poverty? Is there an ethics to the representation of suffering? Or is there an act of responsibility towards the victim? In all these discussions, whether it is Charles Dickens or Hogarth and others, note that the political subtext is very clear. Igort, it is evidently a case of documenting Russian genocidal programs.

In the case of Margaret Bourke-White, the evidence from the Buchenwald camps shows how Nazi Germany treated the Jews. In the case of Charles Dickens, the realist description of Victorian England where the working classes lived in shabby hovels, stinking, non-hygienic conditions, etc. All of these are aesthetics in the broadest category, whether it is the realist mode in Charles Dickens, whether it is the kind of symbolic connotations through which we understand famine in the Holodomor in Ukraine in Igort's work, whether it is a satirical mode of representing cultural practices, cultural identities in Hogarth. We will have more to say about aesthetics and vulnerability in representation in the next class. Thank you.