Scar Cultures
Media, Spectacle, Suffering

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Abstract
The article examines the discourses and representations of suffering in public culture. Situated within cultural emotion studies, it assumes that suffering is tied to 'spectacles' of bodily injury and vulnerability. It first analyzes images and the rhetorics of suffering, pain and trauma. There is now a near-persistent visual culture of extreme and distant deprivation—voluntary, in extreme sports, or involuntary like war or starvation victims—beamed into our living rooms. Discourses of suffering deploy, I propose, a trauma-aesthetic that consists of individualization–personalization and the making of a 'barbaric space'. Visual cultures of bodily trauma constitute now a spectacle of sentiment, the article argues. Finally, I propose the emergence of a moral imagination, a sense of affective communities and a new geopolitics of the world through the discovery of the shared precarity of lives. Scar cultures, the article concludes, has a role to play in global politics because they initiate ethical, affective responses. It is through a commodification of suffering and its ethical consumption that the space is cleared for a new politics of recognition—and this politics is based on the emotional intelligence of the global community

Keywords
Suffering, media, affect, moral imagination, community

Introduction
Scar culture has two key components. The first is the institutional–economic–structural contexts where suffering becomes the theme of various kinds of narratives: films, novels, documentaries and autobiographies. The second is the encoding of emotionally meaningful discourses through specific emotional 'dominants' in the representation of war, contests, terrorist attacks and trauma. The media constructs 'innocent' victims, 'evil' villains and 'brave' heroes—essentially, signs and identities for mass circulation. That a particular kind of body on the screen represents suffering is an act of representation—discourse—that triggers a sentimental response from us. This response is possible because we have developed a visual and affective literacy over time: we know that shackled, beaten bodies represent bodies in pain. This social/common knowledge is what scar culture develops, extends and thrives on through the emotional dominant of 'suffering bodies'.

This article is interested in 'scar culture', the textual, graphic, visual and auditory inputs of suffering that we experience everyday and to which we respond emotionally. It scans scar culture as a multimodal,
multi-platform, multi-generic culture—from films to documentaries to news coverage to reality contests (MTV Roadies or Pulsar Stunt Mania) to autobiographical-testimonial accounts that leave us in shock, despair, anxious, compassionate or threatened.

**Objectives and Conceptual Framework**

The article is situated within a relatively new domain in cultural studies, Cultural Emotion Studies (CES). It examines the discourses—languages, registers, representational modes—of suffering we see circulating in the mass media today.

This article proposes that *scar culture’s emotionally meaningful discourses of suffering, through certain representational modes, enable the creation of a moral imagination that generates an affective sociality, social responsibility and political response* in contemporary public culture. These affective responses enable the making of new identities for victims, identities more in consonance with international laws than rooted in their ethnic or national locations.

**Discussion**

**Suffering and its Affective Sociality**

My ears welled up when I saw that the Taj Mahal and the Oberoi—hotels where I have stayed on numerous occasions—had become targets of terror attacks.

*(The Hindu, 29 November 2008: 9)*

‘Heart-rending’ [on the boat tragedies in Bihar and Kerala]

*(The Hindu, 3 October 2009: 10)*

Suffering is something we can see in others but cannot share. It is a uniquely private, unshareable experience (Scarry 1985). Suffering may involve a certain amount of physical pain, and can be identified as occurring in ‘experiences of bereavement and loss, social isolation and personal estrangement’, comprising of ‘feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt, humiliation, boredom and distress’. It is ‘multidimensional’ and therefore we cannot represent *all* the ways in which suffering may afflict humanity (Wilkinson 2005: 16–17). The representation of suffering gives a voice to those who suffer, while alerting us, witnesses, to the need to alleviate such suffering and attempt to reorder the conditions in which suffering takes place. The politics of scar cultures is the construction of a ‘movement’: inward from the external image towards us, and the outward movement of our emotional responses to the victim in those images.

Ours is the age of ‘compassion fatigue’ (Moeller 1999), a ‘postemotional’ society (Meštroviæ 1997) that persists in its ‘states of denial’ (Cohen 2001). Death is a routine sight on TV and is now ‘profane’ in the sense that, what was once sacred and unique has become a part of everyday life, ordinary and pedestrian. But, while the general trend might be towards indifference there is also a small space being
opened up for voluntary work and interventions based on sympathy, generosity and care, instanced, for example, when Mukhtar Mai records how her story when internationalized elicited support (2007: 80, 118, and elsewhere).

The media’s representation of suffering also enables, therefore, the making of a ‘moral imagination’, an expansion of the capacity to feel the ‘exigency of wrongs suffered by strangers at a distance’ (Laqueur 2001: 134). Media representations and the cultural grammar of suffering—both distant and proximate—offer a space/site where the suffering Other appears before us, and calls upon us to respond ethically to its suffering.2

This emotional response necessarily depends on the nature, magnitude and location of the event, but also prevalent social perceptions of risk, vulnerability, extent of damage and commonly accepted notions about the victims (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002). For instance, there has been very little coverage of the Rwandan genocide in India. Other than the occasional news items about the installation of storm—warning systems in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, the 2004 tsunami and the earlier Latur earthquake have become ‘collateral suffering’ to be invoked only when new traumatic events occur. Thus, all terrorist acts hereafter will be compared with 9/11 and 26/11. In this sense the spectacle that was 9/11 or Kargil or Latur becomes not a finite event, an event-in-process, entering the domain of ‘common knowledge’ (Simon 2008: 353), a metaphor, a usable comparison with no spatial or temporal limits, prone to endless repetition, and the event seems to collapse past, present and future into itself (Simpson 2006: 14), like Abu Ghraib: transposed across time and space and endlessly repeated.

Reiteration means such visuals acquire the status of an ongoing process of cultural memory, calling upon us to adopt an ‘emotional style’ and political views. It is in the act of repetition and translation—into other contexts, where such conditions of torture, the breaking of human bodies and the end of ‘humanity’ are practiced and created—that a universal grammar of suffering and its concordant affects arise. They encode Others into specific identities through the emotionally meaningful discourses of suffering.

**Extreme Cultures and Tele-trauma**

Radha Sarma Hegde, writing in *The Hindu* in the immediacy of 26/11, argued that the public ‘across the country was inducted into new modes of witnessing violence’ (*The Hindu*, Sunday Magazine, 7 December 2008: 1).

The screen is where the distant, suffering Other appears before us incessantly: from Abu Ghraib, Sudan, Tiananmen Square, Somalia or Mumbai demanding attention and a response. The new cultures of sentiment emerge from tele-trauma (‘tele’ means ‘distance’ and ‘far-off’). Tele-trauma is the spectacle of distant suffering beamed into our homes, where real horrors from distant war zones (Abu Ghraib, Afghanistan) and terror strikes (Mumbai 26/11, 9/11) contest for space with torture-porn films (*Hostel, Captivity, Saw*) and extreme sports (hang gliding, ice climbing, bungee jumping). Tele-trauma is the near-persistent visual culture of extreme and distant deprivation, pain and suffering that we are bombarded with in the mass media.

The camera lingering over the bodies at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), bodies falling in slow-mo from the towers on 9/11, the distended bodies of starving children from Sudan or, to go back to an earlier era, the burning children in Vietnam are tele-trauma’s ‘extreme culture’, with the emotional
dominants of horror and pity. It is not that we can just see these scenes of destruction, death and deprivation—it is that in extreme cultures, we cannot avoid seeing them. ‘Extreme vision’ (Boothroyd 2006), thanks to television, embedded journalism and YouTube, is now a regular part of our visual culture and visual fields.

Extreme culture is the co-presence of real-life horrors of involuntary victims and the spectacle of voluntarily risk-taking enthusiasts. The risk in both cases is real—one move and you are dead—but the distinction of involuntary and voluntary victimage is a crucial one. Contestants are injured and some even die during extreme sport programmes (one candidate drowned auditioning for Fear Factor—Khatron Ke Khiladi, 2007). The emotionally meaningful discourse of suffering in these representations encodes particular bodies as ‘bodies-at-risk’, and positions the individual as one likely to be a victim.

Extreme culture is also constituted by documentaries on wild and dangerous animals on Animal Planet or on extreme climates and places of the earth on Discovery. Animal–human encounters or high-risk, life-threatening situations form the subject of numerous documentaries and programmes: Up Close and Dangerous, Untamed and Uncut (with specific programmes like ‘Cobra Attack’ and ‘Python Attack’) on Animal Planet, Dangerous Encounters and NatGeo Wild on National Geographic, Man vs Wild on Discovery. Disaster coverage of tsunamis, Katrina and the Latur earthquakes expand our imagination and vision as to the extremities of survival conditions and possible death. Annual commemorations of Hiroshima–Nagasaki and 9/11 showcase instances of extreme man-made effects: the atom bomb or terrorist attacks. Programmes like BBC Channel 4’s BodyShock and Discovery’s Extreme Bodies that showcase deformed bodies and rare illnesses show us the extreme alterations, whether voluntary or involuntary, possible to bodies. Extending the concerns with bodily limits we also have ‘extreme make-over’. Reality TV programming such as I’m a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here where contestants eat slugs or crawl through swamps are experiments in extreme cultures.

Extreme cultures thrive on a primacy of affect: shock, revulsion and the adrenalin rush (the emotional dominants) of risk and fear. The cumulative effect of all this is our awareness of limit conditions—of human bodies, nature, animal life and, of course, suffering. Extreme cultures breed extreme cultures. It is thus no surprise that torture-porn (exemplified by the movies of Eli Roth) is a popular genre since 2000. Thus, viewing Bruce Willis and Eli Roth films, footage from Iraq or Sudan, there emerges a ‘wider, more mainstream appetite for graphic and increasingly realistic spectacles of suffering bodies’ (Lockwood 2009: 42).

What extreme cultures achieve is a whole new trauma-aesthetic that focalizes the emotional dominant onto a body.

**The Trauma-aesthetic**

On Aap Ki Kacheri, people with civil disputes appear before the ‘judge’ Kiran Bedi. Women complain of being beaten, husbands accuse and children testify. In Emotional Atyachar the chaos when the ‘suspects’ are caught, the messy confrontation and accusations–counter accusations become the subject of high drama, an emotional spectacle of trauma. Visuals of this kind are often shocking, revolting, saddening and unbearable. Their emotional dominant of pain, imminent victimisation, trauma and impending damage trouble us in our minds and hearts with their realism because they make us aware that the visual depicts some real flesh-and-blood human who is suffering.
Suffering is packaged and commodified for maximum affective quotient by corporate bodies that then make profits on this 'package'. Indignation, compassion and the desire for revenge (after 9/11, 26/11) are effects of cumulative representations (such as survivor-victim testimonials). The commodification of suffering is exemplified, I suggest, in the stupendous success of testimonial literature since the 1990s: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Nafisi 2003) (memoir, Iran), Marjani Satrapi's *Persepolis* (graphic memoir, Iran), Khaled Hosseini’s *The kite runner* (Hosseini 2003) (novel, Afghanistan), Jasmina Tesanovic’s *The diary of a political idiot: Normal life in Belgrade* (Tesanovic 2000) (memoir, Bosnia), Joe Sacco’s *Safe area Goražde* (graphic memoir, Bosnia), Sacco’s *Palestine* (graphic memoir, Palestine), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (graphic memoir, Holocaust), Alicia Partnoy’s *The little school* (Partnoy 1998) (fictional memoir, Argentina), Mukhtar Mai, *In the name of honour: A memoir* (Mukhtar 2007) (memoir, Pakistan), etc. From India we can think of Dalit memoirs by Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Laxman Gaikwad, Urmila Pawar but also Pinki Virani’s *Bitter chocolate* (Virani 2000) (child abuse, reportage), Lara Shankar’s *Midway station* (homeless children, reportage and first person accounts), Nandini Oza’s *Whither justice* (Oza 2006) (women prisoners, reportage and first person accounts), Manjal Grewal’s *Dreams after darkness* (Grewal 2004) (Sikhs after 1984, reportage and memoirs).

For this commodification of suffering to maximize its effect, it needs to be individualized and personalized.

**Individualization and Personalization**

In December 2009 two young scientists died in a ghastly fire accident at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). The media gave us the full story of the individuals. Umang Singh, who grew up in a chawl in Jogeshwari, Mumbai, would have been, as one neighbour from the chawl put it, ‘the first boy from our chawl to do so [earn the title of “scientist”]’. The other victim, Partho Pratim Bag, was a ‘village hero’, according to a friend, in his native Bengal state. The coverage on MSN focused on their humble origins, the ethics of hard work and the sense of cruel fate in cutting short the dreams and life of the bright young men. Fate and its cruelty had acquired a face in the traumatic deaths of these scientists. Visuals of weeping friends, testimonials about the young men’s commitment to science and their simple life added to the sense of unforgivable fate (MSN News, 2010). These are the stories that bring suffering home to us.

Stories and testimonies of suffering, victimage and atrocity are cast in an aesthetic that Allen Feldman has termed a ‘trauma-aesthetic’ (Feldman 2004). ‘Trauma-aesthetic’ is the rhetoric of suffering that enables this effect of affect. A good example of this aesthetic and its rhetoric of suffering is post-26/11 media work. Newspapers carried features on the families of the policemen who were killed in the carnage. The rhetoric of suffering is marked by this smooth movement from the distant to the immediate through a very effective slide from an ‘impersonal’ and ‘filmic’ visual of the scene of the carnage—we have seen battle scenes and war zones any number of times on our screens, in the guise of a film—to the lives of ‘real’ people. Such documentaries and films are paralleled by the graphic memoir and autobiography.

Take Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust memoir *Maus* (1986, 1991), Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoirs of Iran, Joe Sacco’s graphic reportage on Palestine and Bosnia and others. The visual culture of trauma is the new aesthetic of suffering. As has been argued (Nayar 2009), the popularity of such graphically violent texts means that contemporary history is not only visualized but made ‘hypervisible’ through the use of an everyday medium like the comic book. Just as war stories demand narratives of individual heroes, suffering demands personalization and individualization. The trauma-aesthetic constantly moves between the twin poles of universal suffering and specific, individualized ones.
Occasionally we see the journalist or the reporter recoiling with shock at the sight. 26/11 was made particularly powerful through this mechanism where the camera recorded the horror on the face of the person doing the reporting, or witnesses staring in horror. When the reporter flinches in front of the camera s/he is *cuing* us to flinch too—by showing how deeply the event moves her/him. What makes scar culture’s tele-trauma so powerful and therefore so emotionally provocative is that *suffering acquires a face*.

The graphic narrative delivers to us history in all its shocking aspects. The subjective adds to rather than retracts from official history. When Satrapi draws young boys being killed in the war and immediately follows it up (on the same page) with a panel showing her partying uncaringly, she shocks us with her very personalized story-telling (*Persepolis I*: 102). The graphic narrative’s complicated mix of subjective narration and objective history, image and text, personal and collective when dealing with historical trauma causes it to function as a subjective documentary. What I am terming ‘hypervisible history’ is the serious transmission of extreme historical trauma from under the weight of censorship, official documentation, unverifiable sources to the public gaze through an apparently frivolous and ‘comic’ medium.

### ‘Barbaric Space’ and the Encounter with Suffering

The space of the visual or narrative of suffering is the construction of a ‘barbaric space’. ‘Barbaric’, in its etymology, suggests ‘uncivilized’, beyond the ability to voice or speak, a space occupied by those who cannot narrate. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writing about photographs of Nazis describes the impersonation (representation) of Nazis by actors and artists—such as Charlie Chaplin of Hitler in *The Great Dictator*, 1940—as the creation of a ‘barbaric space’. For Ezrahi ‘barbarism’ is not only the cruelties of the Nazis but also of ‘acts of representation that take place beyond consensual boundaries—acts that in fact test and challenge the parameters of collective identification’ (2002: 18). ‘Barbaric spaces’ achieve three things.

The visuals of Darfur’s refugee camps, the survivor tales from 26/11, Fox History’s programmes on famines, descriptions of mentally ill patients in asylums or the suffering patients in hospitals construct a space where we are forced to watch suffering (unless you choose to switch channels). ‘Barbaric space’ is the unacceptable delivered to our visual field mediating between the safe space we occupy as spectators and the space of suffering occupied by the victim. I am proposing that the *media and the narrative construct a barbaric space where these distinct spaces collide and evoke strong emotions*. Those who cannot speak, who are consigned by their suffering to spaces beyond speech and self-representation, in this ‘barbaric space’, are given names, faces and recreated as individualized sufferers.

Finally, ‘barbaric space’ that evokes strong emotions also has an important social function (beyond shocking me or any other individual). It constitutes our collective legacy hereafter: how do we deal with our own lives, societies and cultures in the shadow of wars, Abu Ghraib, 9/11, Bhopal, Chernobyl and 26/11? What are the languages in which we formulate our legacies from these great crises? Do we speak of ourselves as a ‘pacific’ nation after 26/11? As responsible citizens after global warming? As a democratic culture after censorship?

Thus, ‘barbaric space’ yokes emotions to policies, nation-state decision-making, cultural practices, institutional mechanisms and social relations. On the one hand, ‘barbaric space’ is the spectacle of distant suffering that generates insurmountable distances between the safe spectator and the injured victim,
but on the other, it calls for a more ethical response within this space of encounter as a legacy of that spectatorship. ‘Barbaric space’ is therefore the construction of the audience as an oriented audience that responds in certain ways, conscious of its legacy.

Spectacles of Sentiment

In the age of tele-trauma suffering is spectacle. If, as Dean Lockwood has noted about torture-porn (2009), there is an increased appetite for spectacles of suffering bodies in contemporary culture, I propose that this quest for excess is a quest for controlled limit conditions. Tele-trauma, therefore, becomes an in-between state: between illusion and reality, an intermediate step between fabricated suffering and the real thing. Suffering thus becomes mediated spectacle, and is Manichean at all times.

The Manicheanism of Tele-trauma

Within the new cultures of sentiment of the cinematic, hyper-mediated society, the real and the virtual, the filmic and the actual blur boundaries. It is symptomatic that the responses to both 9/11 (and 26/11) included comments such as ‘unreal’, ‘surreal’ and ‘like a movie’ (Sontag 2003: 22). Real suffering bodies in Abu Ghraib or Latur or the Andamans, recall for us earlier, fictional representations of natural disasters, wars and suffering. Our viewing of tele-trauma is therefore mediated through a visual literacy already acquired through a viewing of such visuals. This is tele-trauma’s Manicheanism, the absolute, and problematic, dualism of all mediated suffering.

Mediated suffering is an act of facilitated communication, through mediators, translators, interpreters, for those victims who cannot speak. The intrusive camera makes it clear that what we are watching is, and always will be, a mediated version of the gruesome reality and that the camera will be between the event and our vision. If the real is what is delivered ‘pure’—with immediacy—the juggling camera, the photographer and the lights foreground the medium or a state of hypermediacy, a condition of communication that I call ‘Manichean’, the dualism of all tele-trauma which oscillates between this immediacy and hypermediacy.

A second Manicheanism is the frames of interpretation we use to ‘read’ suffering. Let us take Abu Ghraib as an instance here. It is possible to reduce the tortures to individual acts of psychological perversion with comments like ‘this Lynndie England is sicko’. However, individual ‘perversions’ such as England’s must be located within frames that facilitated, maybe even encouraged, such acts (Butler 2009: 82). All suffering, therefore, can be treated within dual frames: of individual psychology, bodily injury and solitary acts but also within their very opposite of socially sanctioned, structurally facilitated ones.

Bodily Trauma, Spectacle and Cultural Anxiety

Reality programming thrives on depicting suffering contestants. Documentaries on African nations, lifestyle programming, medical documentaries, talk shows all have their interest in bodily trauma. Is it that we have all become voyeurs of bodily suffering? Are we interested in exploring the limits of the body and the self? For, in many cases, what is at stake is the coherent self and of the intact body. So when does the breakdown of this self and the fragmentation of the body become a cultural spectacle? Trauma, writes a commentator on this new trend, is a ‘cultural text’ (Radstone 2001: 189).
One can argue that the antics of magicians like Akash Jadugar Anand (driving blindfolded on mountain roads and through rings of fire) and the US magician David Blaine (who went on a starvation show, entombed himself in a block of ice and perched on top of a 100-feet pole) spectacularize bodily trauma. Here ‘magic’ and the real both build on the audience’s cultural anxiety of bodily trauma and injury. Such extreme forms of reality TV merge into the ‘serious’ spectacles of war-torn areas and their maimed children. BBC’s controversial Body Shock made rare—and often horrifying—diseases the subject of documentary spectacle. Reviewing an episode, The Body Whose Skin Fell Off (on Jonny Kennedy who suffered from a rare skin disorder where he was born with no skin on one leg and the rest of his skin was so delicate that it would fall off at the lightest touch), the science editor of the highly respected The Observer wrote: ‘there will never be a final frontier for the media when it comes to dealing with human suffering’ (McKie 2004: 6). VLCC and dietary advice adverts frequently have testimonials from people who say they had a terrible sense of self-worth—a form of psychological suffering—before they lost weight.

Here suffering is not self-indulgence (which is the case with fasting, asceticism or self-mutilation for fashion purposes), and is therefore not seen as salvific or religious. The diseased body becomes the symbol of a cultural anxiety regarding the vulnerability of the body. Such bodily trauma which is intensely private and often isolated suddenly becomes a public event through the media.

Victim narratives subvert the rhetoric and politics of the state, wars and public discourses. The lives and deaths of real people, or the bruised bodies of soldiers, ask unsettling questions of the rhetoric that justify wars. These bodies, sights of widows and mourning mothers (the Republic Day celebrations, 2009, where the widows and mothers of those armed personnel killed on 26/11, are the most recent visuals from such a context) call upon us to reject the (simplistic?) rhetoric of national glory and to emotionally respond to the actuality behind the glory of war.

Scar cultures of today mark a significant shift when they showcase damaged bodies. When private suffering enters the public domain it becomes a spectacle whose emotional dominant appeals to or hinges on a larger cultural anxiety. This spectacle fusing the private and the public is the discourse of suffering in the language of emotional agony and physical pain. Sufferers speak about their disease and campaign for recognition of their cause. (Examples would be Jonny Kennedy campaigning for awareness of epidermolysis bullosa, Terry Pratchett campaigning for Alzheimer’s.)

The spectacle of suffering merges the discourse of private suffering with that of cultural responsibility. All spectacles of bodily trauma therefore call upon the audience to respond in two stages: the affective response of horror and pity with the victim(s) and the pragmatic socio-cultural response in terms of campaigns, fund-raising, legal reform, etc. Campaigns appropriate the discourse of suffering in the language of emotional agony and physical pain by showcasing instances of bodily trauma. These campaigns demand social and cultural ‘frames’—where the disease is legally, medically and socially ‘accepted’ as a disability—of interpretation so that pragmatic measures can be put in place for victims. The pragmatic responses constitute the slide between the emotional style—our response of compassion, agony or anger—and the act of aid and intervention.

Precarious Lives, Witnessing and the Coming Community

Any of us could have been on the street when the gunman opened fire. Any of us could have been walking around the popular Colaba causeway, buying bags and scarves from the hawkers that line its pavements when
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the gunmen barged into Leopold Café and opened fire. Any of us could been like the man who stepped out of his shop to find out what the noise was about only to be shot by the gunmen ….

(Kalpana Sharma 2008: 1)

The operative phrase that Sharma carefully puts in place is ‘any one of us’. Sharma’s rhetoric invites the argument that what happened in Mumbai on 26/11 could have affected ‘any one of us’. Mumbai 26/11 revealed to us the precariousness of all our lives, lives put into jeopardy by people we do not know and who do not know us.

The images from war, famine, train accidents and even 26/11 mark the construction of a ‘barbaric space’ through which we encounter the distant and suffering Other. But it also brings home to me that this could have happened to me, my family, friends or loved ones. It causes us to meditate on vulnerability—our own and others’ (Szorenyi 2009). The recognition, perception and acknowledgement—which we share collectively, and which gives us a sense of disaster, trouble, crisis or doom—of risk and vulnerability when we see mediated suffering invites larger questions of witnessing.

The affective narratives from survivors and victims are ‘ungovernable’, open to interpretation and reinterpretation (Hesford 2004). This interpretative act and function produces and induces new levels of self-consciousness. It is this self-consciousness—or emotional intelligence—that creates a new human subject: one who extends beyond and responds to suffering. The discourse of suffering in contemporary public culture transforms us into witnesses with a tendency towards particular emotional expressions.


It was to be just another journey. But Govindram Ramchandani did not reach his destination that afternoon. A close circuit TV at Byculla station captured the horrifying reason why.

This is scar culture that makes us witnesses to horror.

Witnessing presupposes two things: a person who testifies, attests to something that has happened and which s/he can validate, explain and define and an audience before/to whom the witness testifies. Witnessing has a narrative and representational component. The witness must assume that her/his speech act is one that can be understood—thus implying a shared language—by the audience/hearer.

In Abu Ghraib, Afghanistan, Mumbai’s CST, famine-hit regions, the visual grammar of a suffering body constitutes the act of witnessing. Witnessing is the sign of the intimate because all of these are located in our engagement with suffering. Only when we, as audience, share this grammar of suffering can we become witnesses to the suffering, witness who testifies with and in her/his body. However, we are also asked to imagine what the suffering of the unrepresented others are. Can we, in the absence of any visual identification, assume there are other sufferers? Can we speculate that the bodies of the tortured, dead, damaged on our screens only stand in for dozens, hundreds and thousands of others not visible? Can we simply contextualize an anonymous body/face/identity and expand it to speculate on other such bodies/faces/identities? This ‘crisis of witnessing’ (Hesford 2004) is brought home most often to us in the case of the rape victim where the cultural stigma of being identified as a rape victim means that we are not shown faces or the names are changed. In visuals of rape victims on screen, with blurred faces, what is brought home most forcefully to us in the act of part-invisibility, is the immaterial
(because invisible) materiality (because we are aware of it precisely in its erasure) of the traumatized body. The enforced anonymity of the victim reduces her to a violated body—the epicentre of all attention—and leaves her faceless.

**Self-reflexivity and the Moral Response to Suffering**

During the televised horrors of 26/11, the *Deccan Chronicle*, Hyderabad’s largest circulating English-language newspaper, reported how some upper class citizens continued partying. It went on to quote psychologists and sociologists who concurred:

> People fail to value other’s lives because of the selfish attitude that ‘I am alive’.

And:

> Until you get hurt you think you are safe. This is a kind of escapism.  

*(Deccan Chronicle, Sunday Magazine, 30 November 2008: 19)*

Yet this report shared space with another one: many youth interviewed by the newspaper declared that the National Security Guards (NSG) commandos were their new heroes and that the NSG ‘has inspired many youth to dream of joining the armed forces’ (*Deccan Chronicle, Sunday Magazine, 30 November 2008: 17*).

Spectatorship of suffering induces self-reflexivity in us, enabling us to reflect on politics, difference, ethics and morals. It causes us to acknowledge power relations, especially in the case of crises like famine or poverty: ‘that is not me because I won’t have to starve’. Our sentiments and affective responses to scenes of suffering are conditioned into ‘moral responses’ because of the context in which we view them. The cultural politics of trauma and terror is the construction of mournable objects and ourselves as discerning, caring individuals.

The new cultures of sentiment are accompanied, very often, by cultural discourses about accountability, social responsibility, ethical considerations, thrift and so on. As a spectator I am asked to abandon what I might ‘naturally’ feel at a particular scene or sight (a ‘normal’ response) and instead react in a particular way. Thus, if I am a spectator who feels pleasure at witnessing suffering then the sentiment of shame (at my pleasure) might induce me to perform, against my own sense of pleasure, a more socially expected and socially accepted set of affects such as concern, grief, sympathy and pity. Compulsory affectivity is a generalized condition of our times.

Compulsory affectivity means we offer the ‘appropriate’ response to suffering because we imagine what the social response to our indifference might be. This is a ‘split’ spectatorship or witnessing. A split spectatorship is a ‘moral spectatorship’, where the spectator sees her/himself through the imagined gaze of the others and acts accordingly (*Cartwright 2008: 232*).

Corporate bodies and offices adopting social roles and responsibilities—in what is called ‘neat capitalism’—is an instance of this self-reflexivity and its moral response. Conscious of their profiteering, MNCs and capitalist barons begin to assume social responsibilities. *Imagining* a social criticism of their functioning, the company’s emotional intelligence suggests to them that social responsibilities add to the façade of their character. The organized emotional style of these social acts is an attempt to prepare emotional capital for the company.
The Geopolitics of Affect and the Coming Community

Towards the conclusion of Moore and Gibbon’s cult text, *Watchmen* (1987), New York has just had about 3 million of its citizens killed as part of a project to unite the world in awe at such potential destruction (the person responsible is a superhero, Veidt). As a result, as Veidt predicts, the world wakes up to the possible destruction of everybody. This leads to accords and peace treaties—exactly the result Veidt hoped to achieve. Two posters announce the new world order. ‘One world, one accord’ is followed by another announcing the ‘millennium’. The visual—expectedly raced—shows a blonde male and blonde female. The text of the second reads, ‘[T]his is the time. These are the feelings’ (Moore & Gibbon 1987: Chapters 12, 31). The suggestion is that the world has come together because of a commonality of feeling, and ‘mutually assured destruction’ (acronym: MAD) results in a sentimentalized world order.

In the twentieth century the global humanitarian regime has taken on the form of the Red Cross, Amnesty, Greenpeace and social movements against racism and for gender justice in an ‘internationalization of conscience’ (Wilkinson 2005: 136–56) as a response to suffering. It is the ‘moral imagination’ generated through scar culture’s discourse of suffering, and the resultant affective response, that produces these social movements. Emotions and their cultural politics can be harnessed to effective political strategies against war and institutionalized suffering. New forms of international appropriation, circulation and reception of such narratives offer a whole new form of cosmopolitanism and globalization.

Globalization brings with it ‘terrors’ of dissolving boundaries, flows (Castells 1996), time–space compression (Harvey 1989, ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2001), the fragmentation of the social (Jenks 2005) and atomization. This is the age of ‘thin solidarities’ and ‘cool commitments’ (Turner 2000). The new cultures of sentiment with their discourse of suffering offer a unifying agenda to counter these terrors of instability, displacement and non-rootedness: a geopolitics of affect where care and concern collapse the world too. It is salutary here to recall Ashis Nandy’s injunction:

The only way the Third World can transcend the sloganeering of its well-wishers is, first, by becoming a collective representation of the victims of man-made suffering everywhere in the world and in all past times, second, by internalizing or owning up the outside forces of oppression and, then, coping with them as inner vectors and third by recognizing the oppressed or marginalized selves of the First and Second Worlds as civilizational allies in the battle against institutionalized suffering. (1987/ 1998: 441)

Like the global humanitarian regimes of the colonial period, a unification of the world is on through the activities of social movements, transnational organizations and extended volunteerism. Resisting the space of flows and indeterminacies is the geopolitics of affect where—moved by scar culture’s representation of suffering of the distant Other, facilitated by tele-trauma—organizations and individuals seek to map a different world order based on ethics. This search for an ethical response and world order is the emotional style merging into a social pragmatics of aid and political intervention.

This new world order based on the new cultures of sentiment demands an ethical response to the sights of the world’s poor, damaged and deprived. Scott Barrett’s study of the ‘incentive to supply global public goods’ (2007) offers us an ethical reasoning why we should all fight to prevent nuclear proliferation, for the suppression of killer pandemics, climate change mitigation and fundamental scientific knowledge because:

We should care because our wellbeing, the wellbeing of future generations, and even the fate of the Earth depends on them [global public goods] being provided ... Failure to supply these global public goods exposes the world to great dangers. Providing them expands human capabilities. (2007: 1)
Barrett’s work calls for a new, ethically informed, geopolitics. This ethical response shows up in the form of affective communities and voluntary, non-state groups (Doctors without Borders), human rights watch (Witness) and cultural affiliations. Such a moral imagination triggered by tele-trauma is the arrival of emotional intelligence, and a new way of dealing with the distant parts of the increasingly borderless world, where expressions of solidarities with victims of oppression and suffering are the consequences of emotional intelligence and political acts that create the foundations of new alliances and the possibilities of a new world order.

Such solidarities have resulted in very powerful narrative acts—where the versions and accounts of oppression that have been silenced by the state have been made visible. The Darfur rape camps, Guantanamo Bay, Bosnia–Serbia, Burma are instances where the global community was able to react on the basis of narratives smuggled out and made public. My proposition, via Das and Kleinman (2001), is that a sentimentalization is the basis of a new ethnography of suffering. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (2004) have shown, affective testimony can also serve as human rights testimony. It is precisely this shift in the recognition of voice-genres and speech acts (hysteria, silence, screams, rantings versus rational dialogue, logical arguments) that marks the making of the sentimental spectacle of a new culture of sentiment.

When taken into court—as most recently seen in the 26/11 trial where survivors and the injured have testified, or the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission—first person accounts of suffering serve the juridical system in the form of testimonials. Testimonials, even without the legal discourse, play a prominent role in drama management when telecast and disseminated worldwide. The discourse of suffering generates a compelling intimacy across regions, locations, time frames and people.

‘Drama management’ (Alberto, Pereira & Herschmann 2004) is the emotional dominant in the representation of suffering that solicits a response of heightened emotions. Tele-trauma and affective representations help create a sensus communis. It becomes the logic of a new community—a logic built on affect, sentiment and emotional intelligence’s affective response. Suffering then can become the anterior moment of the community to come. This anterior moment is possible only when singular testimonies of suffering are made available to the world.

A testimony is what the sufferer-victim delivers in the language unique to her or him, often offering her/his body itself as the sign of suffering. However, even exemplary instances of testimony must be repeatable elsewhere. An entire technics of iteration—where the testimony is translated into several languages and dispersed—is intrinsic to sufferer testimony. The testimony—however localized, unique and idiomatic it may be—must be placed within a larger language and grammar through this process of ‘translation’. Translation here is the appeal to and situating within a larger, universalized context of engagement with the unique register of the victim’s testimony. What we see when we ‘watch’ 26/11, Darfur, atrocity is a double movement: the uniqueness of an individual or group’s suffering translated into a universal grammar of pain to which we respond affectively.

Scar cultures re-allocate identities for those identified as wrong within a set of parameters not restricted to, ratified or even accepted by the country/culture of the victimage. These victims become the subjects of international human rights law rather than subjects of a country or ethnic community. In a sense they become postnational citizens, whose interests and rights are discussed, guaranteed and defended beyond the immediate territory of their suffering.
Conclusion

Suffering is now tied to spectacles of bodily injury and vulnerability. The spectacle of suffering bodies and its attendant globalization of precarity threatens the autonomy of my body. In order to ensure the autonomy and safety of my body I need to ensure the socius, the habitat and the community in which my body is located, are safe. Judith Butler’s argument that mourning, fear and grief opens up our bodies to the world is an interesting interpretation of the social body. The ‘mindfulness’ of corporeal vulnerability, argues Butler, calls upon us to ask: ‘Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?’ (2009: 29).

The answer is what I have offered earlier as a geopolitics and cultural politics of affect, but with an additional feature: power. The difference in the nature of vulnerability and potential is very often about relations of power. Do we recognize the Other as a potential sufferer? Do we recognize our vulnerability as a version of the vulnerability of the Other? Finally, what power relations determine the vulnerability quotient of individuals, groups and communities? Veena Das (2000) point out that a ‘new political geography’ of the world has emerged where ‘whole areas are marked off as “violence-prone areas”’ (2000: 1). This new geography of the world is about power and vulnerability: Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, northeastern India, Bosnia, Somalia … the list proliferates as we speak.

The coming community is an acknowledgement of power relations and the recognition of differential degrees of vulnerability to which we can and must respond ethically. Reading empathically in and through scar culture and in terms of larger contexts (such as human rights) become what Gillian Whitlock terms the ‘transit lane’ (2007) that allow such narratives to move across the globe. Such scar cultures in the cultures of sentiment establish a new ‘communicative ethics’ if they are able to convey something of the trauma—and generate an empathetic response—to places, peoples and cultures beyond the immediate.

The discourse of suffering is a way of thinking about politics itself when we map ‘our’ part of the world, region, community as linked to another, even distant but equally vulnerable region or community. The emotional intelligence of the global community—where our shocked or pitying responses are harnessed to pragmatic solutions like aid—is what is targeted and cultivated here. It is through a commodification of suffering and its ethical consumption that the space is cleared for a new politics of recognition. This new ‘political’ and ethical act of recognition based on a discourse of suffering and a common denominator of vulnerability could become the anterior moments of a new world order.

Notes
2. The commodification of suffering that initiates ‘compelling intimacies’ also determines the reception of scar culture’s texts. Scar culture is as marketable a commodity as any other, and commercial concerns (the success of the Afghani, The Kite Runner or the Iranian Reading Lolita in Tehran are instances) do determine the nature and form of the work. This means, the ‘framing’ of these texts is a crucial component of how the cultures of sentiment are packaged and manipulated for the consumer.
3. Even fear and paranoia are related to the media’s endless reproduction of faces and bodies: Bin Laden as the ‘face’ of terrorism, Saddam Hussein as the ‘face’ of nuclear threat, etc.
4. After 9/11 various academic disciplines have felt the need to address Otherness and the radical Other (Ball 2008).
5. Indeed Hollywood’s spectacularization of terrorism has a long history. See Boggs and Pollard (2004).
6. Such interventionary movements are not unproblematic, though. For instance, one of the key discourses in the ‘war on terror’ was the goal of ‘liberating’ the Afghan woman from the Taliban. Major American periodicals such as Business Week, Newsweek, Time all carried the image of a burqa-clad woman on cover in the months following 9/11. The US government’s Bureau of Democracy explicitly located the ‘war on terror’ as a response to the alleged Taliban’s War Against Women (Bureau of Democracy, 2001). For studies of this gendered nature of the ‘war on terror’, see Stabile and Kumar (2005).

References


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