# 3

# The Holocaust Sublime

## *Singularity, Representation, and the Violence of Everyday Life*

*By* JOHN SANBONMATSU*

> The world of the concentration camps . . . was not an exceptionally monstrous society. What we saw there was the image, and in a sense the quintessence, of the infernal society in which we are plunged every day.
>
> —Ionesco[1]

ABSTRACT. It has become common to view mass historical traumas like the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the Holocaust as *singularities*—in other words, events of such transcendent, almost metaphysical significance that they exceed intelligibility. Siding with "realist" intellectuals who instead emphasize the rootedness of genocide in the structures of modernity and everyday life, I argue that the discourse of singularity aestheticizes historical trauma in problematic ways. Drawing on Kant's analytic of the sublime, in which the subject, in confronting an awesome or terrifying phenomenon from a position of safety, comes to realize his or her own powers of transcendence and moral superiority, I argue that the *holocaust sublime* encourages the viewing subject to "face" overwhelming horrors of the past, but

*John Sanbonmatsu teaches philosophy and politics at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, where he is Assistant Professor of Philosophy. He is the author of *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject* (2004) and editor of the forthcoming *On the Animal Question: Essays in Critical Theory and Animal Liberation* (2009). His main research interests lie in Continental, political, and social philosophy, especially Marxism and critical theory, animal liberation studies, technology studies, and the sociology of intellectuals. Among his current projects are a study of post-Fordist fascist tendencies in the American state, a Heideggerian reading of Microsoft Word, and *The Unbearable Catness of Being*—an experimental film on the phenomenology of cats. Professor Sanbonmatsu thanks Edward Demenchonok for his indispensably helpful comments during the editing of this manuscript.

American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Vol. 68, No. 1 (January, 2009).
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without having to confront the subject's actual responsibility for the atrocities of the present. By pitting the extraordinary or "singular" against the banal and everyday, the holocaust sublime thus obscures, rather than reveals, the habits of thought and social structures that make genocidal practices inevitable.

## I

## Between Realism and Transcendence

Over the last century, we human beings managed to inflict far greater harm on one another, and with far greater efficiency, than we had ever managed before. The rise of powerful nation-states armed with highly destructive modern technologies made possible the implementation of whole new scales of atrocity and extermination. The twentieth century began unpromisingly with World War I and the Armenian genocide, took a brief detour at mid-century into a global war that killed 60 million people and introduced humanity to atomic science at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, took another detour into a ruinous war in Southeast Asia that killed 3 to 5 million people, and finally drew to a close with the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans, the murder of nearly a million people in Rwanda, and the deaths of at least 5 million in the Congolese war. As if to redeem the past, or perhaps to inoculate the new century against the horrors of the last one, by the beginning of the twenty-first century human beings had made commemoration and memorialization of mass killing into a minor global industry. Millions of tourists flocked to the ruins of Auschwitz and Treblinka, Tuol Sleng and Hiroshima, or stood patiently in line at the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Those who lacked the resources to make the pilgrimage to such sites of witness instead took solace in the thousands of books and films about the genocides and atrocities of the past.

Ironically, though, as much as we are drawn to representations and narratives of historical mass trauma—the intentional infliction of extreme violence on one group of people by another—most of our public acts of commemoration and memorialization have taken pains

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to steer clear of anything that might resemble a *politics*. Why this is so, and with what consequences for our understanding not only of the past, but of the present and future as well, is the subject of this essay.

Few issues are more contentious than the politics of the past, particularly in cases of historical genocide, where questions of fact sit uneasily alongside questions of blame, agency, and staggering moral failure. The debate over how, and indeed whether, mass trauma should be represented was joined not long after the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By 1946, with radioactive clouds still lingering over Japan, European and American intellectuals had already clashed over the problem of how to represent the bombings. At one end of the spectrum, critics such as Georges Bataille denied that there was anything fundamentally new or unique about the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan.[2] At the other end, Mary McCarthy condemned John Hersey for his essay in the *New Yorker* about Hiroshima, on grounds that it reduced a singular, unrepresentable event to mere reportage—by "minimizing the atom bomb by treating it as though it belonged to the familiar order of catastrophes—fires, flood, earthquakes—which we have always had with us." Hersey's reliance on interviews with survivors, McCarthy felt, amounted to "an insipid falsification of the truth of atomic warfare," since "[to] have done the atom bomb justice, Mr. Hersey would have had to interview the dead."[3]

For the first 15 years or so after the war, with the emergence of a nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union, the public was understandably more focused on the implications of the atomic bombings in Japan than on the terrible fate that had befallen the Jews and other groups in Eastern Europe. By the 1970s, though, due in large measure to persistent efforts by Jewish historians, critics, and civic leaders to keep Hitler's murder of European Jewry from receding into the past, the "Holocaust" (as it was now called) had decisively replaced Hiroshima at the forefront of popular and scholarly discourses about "singularity."[4]

The two main poles of debate about Holocaust representations can be separated into what Michael Rothberg has helpfully called "realist" versus "anti-realist" positions.[5] The realist or, as it were, *sociological* position sees the Holocaust as rooted in rather than an exception to the fundamental structures of modernity. The French-Romanian

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playwright Ionesco staked out a starkly realist position in 1956 with his statement that "the world of the concentration camps" resembled nothing so much as the "infernal" society of the present. However, the standard-bearer of the realist position soon became Hannah Arendt, whose *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, originally published in 1963, portrayed the man in charge of many of the logistical details of the Holocaust less as a monster than as a petty, unimaginative bureaucrat. Arendt saw in Eichmann's thoughtlessness and bad faith a symptom of our epoch. As she wrote in *The Human Condition*:

> We are perhaps the first generation which has become fully aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided they are *efficient*, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end.[6]

As Seyla Benhabib observes, Arendt's approach broke with traditional accounts of evil that historically had depicted evil "in metaphysical terms as ultimate depravity, corruption, or sinfulness."[7] Arendt's critique was later extended by critics like Zygmunt Bauman, whose influential book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1987) traced the problem of mass murder to the alienating and anonymous features of the administered society.[8]

Where the realist position locates the Holocaust on a continuum with the everyday and otherwise unremarked features of modern civil society, particularly alongside forms of bureaucratic rationality inimical to the examined life and ethical behavior, the *anti-realist* perspective, by contrast, views the Holocaust as a *singularity*: that is, as an irreducibly unique historical trauma of such magnitude and horror—in a word, *evil*—as to exceed the bounds of historical, political, sociological, and even moral intelligibility. Unlike other atrocities or injustices, *singularities* are totems of such radical disjuncture that they open an impassable chasm between the Event and what we take to be life as such. Hence the remark by Claude Lanzmann, the director of the film *Shoah*, that the Holocaust:

> is unique first of all in that it erects around itself, in a circle of flames, a limit which cannot be breached because a certain absolute is intransmissable: to claim to do so is to make oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression.[9]

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Unlike other anti-realist critics, however, Lanzmann nonetheless denied that the Shoah fell "outside history," or that it "[eluded] all intellectual and conceptual comprehension."[10] Such a position thus contrasts with the more radical one staked out by Elie Wiesel, the most widely known Holocaust commentator in the world, who has argued that " 'Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized' " because it " 'transcends history.' "[11]

More is at stake in this debate between realists and anti-realists than may first appear. If the Holocaust is indeed a "singular" event, one standing outside ordinary life, then the edifice of civilization trembles, but remains standing. But if we determine the roots of genocide to extend more deeply, into the humus of society itself—if Bauman is right that the Shoah was consistent "with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world"—then we have reason to doubt the fundamental ethical soundness and stability of our entire administrative and social order.[12] In such an eventuality, we might also want to reassess the discourse of singularity itself—to ask whether thinking and talking about mass historical trauma in *this* way is a productive approach, after all. For it is possible, as Peter Novick maintains, that "talk of uniqueness and incomparability [in genocide] . . . promotes evasion of moral and historical responsibility" by obscuring the true origins of genocidal violence, including such violence in our own time.[13]

In the pages that follow, I want to suggest that this is indeed the case—that the way we often go about representing and talking about singularity occludes both the social origins, and the continuing political stakes, of past traumatic events, in ways that may normalize the very structures of authority and power that give rise to extreme forms of violence. I specifically want to explore the possibility that in invoking a particular aesthetic dimension in our encounter with past atrocities—a Kantian *sublime*—representations of singularity disadvantage forms of understanding and perceiving that might in fact offer us a more productive engagement with the past. Rather than help the subject face his or her true moral and civic duties, the *holocaust sublime* may interfere with the subject's quest for an authentic moral relation to trauma.

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II

**Holocaust Aesthetics and the Bad Faith of Modernity**

Dominick LaCapra sees a tendency in "modern theory and practice . . . to link the traumatic to—or even convert it into—*the sublime* by transvaluing it and making it the basis for an elevating, supraethical, even elevated or quasi-transcendental test of the self or the group."[14] Indeed, once we begin to interpret the Holocaust as a metaphysical event for the Jewish people, as an event whose ultimate significance therefore lies permanently beyond history and normal understanding, then our every approach to the phenomenon seems cut off, save one: the aesthetic dimension. Moreover, as LaCapra observes, the discourse of singularity invokes not just any aesthetic experience, but more specifically the one described by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Judgment*. For, just as in the sublime we come face to face with (in the words of Paul Crowther in his analysis of Kantian aesthetics) "an object of extreme destructive power," one that compels us "to consider possible or actual effects so enormously devastating as to exceed our perceptual and imaginative capacities"—so, too, in coming face to face with historical trauma, we find ourselves temporarily incapacitated.[15] At the same time, however, it is through our encounter with the sublime, whether in nature or in a Holocaust museum, that we thereby also come to realize our own powers and sense of agency over the aesthetic object.

In *Critique of Pure Judgment*, Kant identified two different kinds of aesthetic experience, the beautiful and the sublime. While our experience of the beautiful involves us in appreciation of a particular object's form, and hence defines a *limit* in our experience that allows us to exercise our powers of judgment, the sublime, by contrast, represents an encounter with an object that is pure "limitlessness" itself, lacking "finality" of form.[16] Sublime phenomena—the terrible storm, the yawning chasm—may over-awe us with their power or vastness. Facing a stunning mountain prospect or raging river, we feel "astonishment amounting almost to terror, the awe and thrill of devout feeling."[17] The phenomenon confronts us with its "magnitude and power," and threatens "chaos" and the "wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation."[18] Unlike the beautiful, which invites us to use

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of our cognitive and perceptual capacities, the sublime is not "tainted with any judgement of understanding or reason."[19] Indeed, it is only "sublime" to the very extent that we experience it as "an outrage on the imagination"[20]—"an abyss in which [imagination] fears to lose itself."[21] Our usual modes of cognition shut down. We see the roiling ocean not empirically, as "a spacious realm of aquatic creatures" or a means of navigation and trade, but "as threatening to overwhelm and engulf everything."[22] Our mind is thus attracted and "repelled" at the same time, drawn less by a feeling of pleasure, perhaps, than by "admiration and respect."[23] What is key for Kant, however, is that in coming face to face with such an object of overwhelming scale and potential destructive power, we also know that it cannot harm us. This is the source of our exhilaration: the knowledge that we are viewing the sublime object from a position of *safety*.

I wonder if we do not experience something like this when we stand mute before a heap of shoes stripped from Jews at Treblinka, or the burned uniforms of school girls caught near the hypocenter of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima: we are surrounded by the artifacts of true terror, but without being crushed by them. Perhaps we can project ourselves, briefly, into the empty shoes left over from the children shipped to Dachau or Bergen-Belsen. But we do so knowing that we ourselves are safe. Indeed, how can we help feeling secretly grateful for the fact of our own personal survival and invulnerability? In confronting extreme destruction, but from the safety of the *present*, do we not find, however faintly, "enjoyment but with horror"[24]—the "satisfaction" of a terror viewed at a distance? I do not have in mind merely the vulgar exploitation of trauma, for instance, in sexual titillation and cheap emotional effects, though such crass approaches, more widespread than one would hope (cf. the use of female nudity in *Schindler's List*), do bear out Adorno's fear that post-Holocaust art would offer audiences (in Rothberg's words) a "surplus of pleasure" through "sadistic identification."[25] Rather, I mean the way in which an appeal to an aesthetic of singularity may invoke in the subject an unwonted feeling of moral efficacy and even moral superiority over the past, over other human beings, and even over nature itself.

The value of sublime experience according to Kant lies in its ability to elicit in us a sense of absolute freedom as autonomous,

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rational beings. As Crowther puts it, "moral consciousness is sublime *because* it manifests the ultimate authority and transcendence of our rational over our sensible being."[26] Transcendence in the sphere of moral self-determination is thus closely akin to our feeling of elation in our encounter with "the great." While "we recognize that some object has the capacity to destroy us, we can, from a position of safety, imagine ourselves as *morally resistant* even in the face of destruction."[27] In our encounter with the holocaust sublime, similarly, we encounter the "supersensible," an event beyond limit, and so may imagine ourselves to be "morally resistant" to evil. In this way we may idealize our *own* powers of moral and spiritual redemption, powers we gain through ersatz acts of witness. Rituals of remembrance and commemoration give meaning to singularity and imbue it with its special cathartic and redeeming power. We walk away from a holocaust exhibit feeling exhausted and sickened, yes; but we also feel morally "sated" for having "faced" the horror, and overcome it. We may even come away thinking that we have done *moral work*. Thus Oprah Winfrey's remark to her television audience, "I'm a better person as a result of seeing *Schindler's List*."[28] Or this honest account by Tim Cole describing his feelings upon visiting Auschwitz for the first time:

> We were tourists of guilt and righteousness: guilt at an almost pornographic sense of expectancy of the voyeurism ahead. And yet guilt tempered by a sense of righteousness at choosing to come to this place.[29]

Ironically, though, as Novick observes, the conflation of passive consumption of spectacle with moral action—the belief that traveling to holocaust sites is "morally therapeutic," even "that multiplying such encounters will make one a better person"—in fact only serves to undermine the subject's claim to a genuine moral autonomy and good will.[30] How could it be otherwise, when the subject's feeling of safety ensures that his or her own *moral goodness* is neither put in question nor put to the test? Most representations of the Holocaust, after all, do a better job inviting the museum patron or viewer to identify with the victims than with the perpetrators or bystanders, enabling the spectator to elevate him- or herself above the indifferent or culpable individuals of the past—those who *let this happen*.

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In this way, our good-faith effort to make amends for calamities of the past may imperceptibly slip into a form of "bad faith" in Sartre's sense of that term. As Sartre writes, I act in bad faith when I attempt "to constitute myself as being what I am not." When I lie to myself or refuse the burden of my own free will and conscience, I act *inauthentically*, "as being what I am not." Bad faith thus "apprehends me positively as courageous when I am not so."[31] Is this not our experience as we sit in a darkened theater, waiting for *Schindler's List* to begin? We flatter ourselves, imagining that there is personal courage involved in witness, even though we are laying witness not to singularity itself, but to its faint shadow—a shadow we know cannot harm us.[32] We may cry, but the smoke from the crematoria never gets in our eyes.

Discourses of singularity can even offer us psychological and existential comfort—by distancing us from other instances of suffering. As various critics have observed, focusing on a "singular" past trauma may overshadow other historical cases of mass suffering. Hence Holocaust scholar Steven Katz, who, in the process of defending his thesis concerning "the particular, singular nature" of the Shoah, also feels it necessary to deny the right of other ethnic groups—Armenians, Native Americans, victims of Pol Pot—to use the term *genocide* to describe their own historical experience of violence.[33]

Yet the chief psychological advantage of the "holocaust sublime" may rest not in distancing us from the past but in its ability to inoculate us against the moral and political claims of the *present*. "Under cover of the sublime and the superhuman, all manner of dehumanization is . . . smuggled in": so wrote Henri Lefebvre, commenting on the suppression or forced forgetting of "everyday life" in modernist aesthetics.[34] Art and philosophy, LeFefebvre wrote, have "drawn closer to everyday life . . . only to *discredit* it."[35] In a similar vein, we might say that singularity cannot help discrediting the everyday, the concrete terrain of the present, insofar as the everyday itself necessarily becomes the unseen perceptual horizon against which the "singular" gathers ontological and hence ethical weight. That is, focusing on singularity *qua* singularity forces a disjuncture between itself and the merely "everyday" by representing an epistemological framework against which all else appears small or distant. As Thane Rosenbaum

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observes, for example, commenting on the Israeli state's seeming indifference to the plight of contemporary Holocaust survivors (many of whom suffer from inadequate medical care and lack of a livable income):

> The Holocaust, so large an atrocity, has a way of overshadowing everything, including its survivors. In focusing on the past in order to prevent history from repeating itself, we have forgotten those who are the direct casualties of this crime. Amid all the Holocaust hoopla the survivors have become secondary.[36]

But the "threat" posed by singularity is greater than this suggests. For singularity to be intelligible, to command our attention as a determinate shape or form, it must also naturalize quotidian structures of violence as "ordinary." Thus, we wait in line to see Anne Frank's hiding place, but turn a blind eye to child sexual slavery in Asia, Africa, and Latin America today, ignore the consequences of global poverty—the fact that 10 million children die each year as a result of structural inequalities in the world capitalist system—or avoid scrutinizing a world patriarchal order in which millions of women are raped or physically brutalized by men. Neither the poor nor the victims of male violence get a memorial because their suffering lacks the sacralizing element provided by a *motive*, that is, the conscious *will* of a figure of absolute evil.

The trouble arises from the fact that, as sociologists and political theorists of power have argued, even atrocities on the scale of the Holocaust find their origins in ordinary institutions and cultural norms, and it is precisely this aspect of genocide that is the first to be overlooked or downplayed in most discussions of "singularity." Worse still, to the extent that singularity is the *extraordinary*, we may unconsciously come to feel a kind of indifference toward, or even contempt for, the *ordinary*. As Kant himself writes, just as we "always couple with the representation [of the great] a kind of respect," we also bestow "a kind of contempt" on that "which we call absolutely small."[37] This dialectic between the "great" and the "small" is of course realized only through a particular, willing, knowing subject who, at the moment of aesthetic realization, transforms his or her initial feelings of humility and insignificance before "the great" into a moment of supreme existential triumph. Implicit in Kant's aesthetic

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theory is an internal relationship between sublime experience and a sovereign subject who experiences his or her own infinity (freedom) as a rational being. According to Kant, at our moment of being humbled by the sublime, that which appears boundless and limitless (but, too, appears most *other* and least assimilable to reason), mind becomes aware of *itself*. We become aware of ourselves as the *kind of being* who transcends nature. Faced with the sublime, we encounter not something external to us, but a "ground" that is "in ourselves."[38] It is "precisely because" our minds strive toward infinity and totality that the "inability on the part of our faculty for the estimation of the magnitude of things" awakens in us "a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us."[39] We come to realize our ontological superiority—our essence as a pure, autonomous subjectivity whose freedom can in no way be diminished by what lies outside it. Mind "feels itself elevated in its own estimate of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its ideas."[40]

In the context of Holocaust representation, this existential jujitsu between the subject and the phenomenal object of experience leads to an even more subtle form of bad faith: we find moral redemption (we believe) not merely for ourselves, as individuals, but for our troubled s*pecies* as well. That is, we can only "elevate" ourselves at the expense of a natural *other*. As Kant writes, the subject:

> [attempts] to gain access to [the sublime object] through imagination, for the purpose of feeling the might of this faculty . . . and of thus being superior to internal and, therefore, external, nature. . . . [Imagination] is a might enabling us to assert our independence as against the influences of nature, to degrade what is great in respect of the latter to what is little, and thus to locate the absolutely great only in the proper estate of the Subject.[41]

What is key here is that the subject must feel "superior" to a "degraded" nature in order to experience its moment of transcendence. Bonnie Mann, in an important critique of the Kantian sublime, argues that what Kant in fact depicted as a universal, objectively valid aesthetics was instead the expression of a project "of Euro-masculine self-constitution," one that helped to generate and legitimate that durable ontological fiction of the disembodied, rational, self-controlled male subject.[42] In this light, we might say that the holocaust sublime invites us to participate in not one, but two forms of

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existential bad faith. First, at a meta-interpretive level, the very tidiness with which the Holocaust exhibit curator represents trauma invokes a teleological narrative of progress, one that signals to us, implicitly (i.e., *by the very fact of its existence*) that in spite of everything, in spite of all the horror, humankind is steadily "working things out." Second, and relatedly, it may lull us into complacency by flattering us with a *humanist* ideology, one that happens to coincide with all-too-convenient myths of our supposed transcendence of, and superiority to, nature.

Since the Enlightenment, we have in fact been so convinced of our essence as reasonable and perfectible beings that we have tended to apprehend even the historical atrocities not as evidence of our incorrigible nature, a sign of our historical failures of transcendence, but rather of our very species superiority. Viewing carefully arranged curatorial artifacts, or awed by a cinematic portrayal of mass killing, we are horrified by the knowledge of what we humans have done, but we may also come away feeling strangely reassured: despite the horrible things humans are capable of, we also recognize ourselves as the kind of being who, though unable to escape its past, is nonetheless able to *tame* it. Ironically, the holocaust sublime may in this way summon in us the very narcissism and grandiosity of the modern subject that has enabled or authorized, inter alia, mass atrocity, war, oppression of other creatures, and the destruction of the ecosystem.

For example, in 2003 and again in 2005, the Jewish U.S. Anti-Defamation League went on the offensive against several animal rights groups that had compared the confinement and killing of millions of "farm" animals to the experience of Jews and other groups in the concentration camps of Europe during World War II. The ADL accused the groups of making "outrageous" and "offensive" claims. "The uniqueness of human life," the group's National Director wrote, "is the moral underpinning for those who resisted the hatred of the Nazis and others ready to commit genocide even today."[43] Invoking the Shoah would only "trivialize the suffering of the six million Jews and others who died at the hands of the Nazis."[44] Adding to the interest of this exchange was the fact that one of the animal rights groups in question, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, had dramatized its

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"Holocaust on a Plate" campaign by publicizing quotes by several *Jewish* intellectuals and concentration camp survivors, including the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, who more than once compared our treatment of other animals to an "eternal Treblinka," and Theodor Adorno, who wrote: "Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals."[45] The striking contrast between, on the one hand, these and similar statements made soon after the war by an earlier generation of Jewish intellectuals (themselves survivors), and, on the other, the ADL's press statements 50 years later, raises the question of whether sacralization of the Holocaust over the intervening period might account for the difference in tone. Has not sacralization of singularity heightened, rather than diminished, the sense of radical difference between humans and nonhumans, at least for some?[46] It may be that "elevating" the human subject so that it can properly appreciate a holocaust sublime requires the humiliation and degradation of some external "other." As Kant himself writes, the "delight" we feel in the sublime stems directly from the fact that "nature [sinks] into insignificance before the ideas of reason."[47]

## III

## The Threat of the Political

SINGULARITY IS sometimes said to verge on the sacred, constituting a "charged space"[48] set off from ordinary discourse. If so, then what most threatens it may be the *political. Politics*, one of the most profane and least metaphysical of human activities, must be contained and neutralized if holocausts are to be approached aesthetically.

Forty years ago, scholarship of the Holocaust was inseparable from the study of the ideology and culture of German fascism. Today, Holocaust scholars and mainstream culture producers alike largely steer clear of overtly political themes. As Norman Finkelstein notes, while "dissenting intellectuals [once] deployed robust political categories such as 'power,' 'interests'. . . and 'ideology,' " academics discussing the Holocaust today are more comfortable using "the bland, depoliticized language of 'concerns' and 'memory.' "[49] Sociologist Michael Mann, similarly, observes that today's literature on

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the Jewish Holocaust and the literature on fascism and Nazism "have little in common" and are "kept in separate scholarly and popular compartments inhabited by different theories, different data, different methods."[50]

The trouble with such compartmentalization is that it makes it difficult for society to examine itself in ways that might actually prove productive. As LaCapra notes, today's "preoccupation with memory" in the field of Holocaust studies "may indicate a failure of constructive will and divert attention from the needs of the present and the necessity of attempting to reshape the future."[51] In other words, because reflection on genocide gets reserved for specialists and academics, it also gets divorced from a meaningful praxis. To the extent that singularity is allowed to intrude into the present, it is only as eternal recurrence of the same, as a phrase or slogan to express outrage against the past—*Never again shall the Nazis kill the Jews*—rather than a call to resist oppression today.

In his analytic of the sublime, Kant defined the sublime as a "*non comparative magnum—what is beyond all comparison great*," insisting of the sublime that "it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself."[52] Kant's definition is echoed in Yehuda Bauer's remark that the Shoah "is of such a tremendous magnitude that an ordinary person's mind is incapable of absorbing it." We try "to run away from it, deny it, and, mainly, try to reduce it to shapes and sizes we can cope with."[53] In practice, however, reducing singularity to a size we can cope with often seems to mean suspending our critical faculties. The avoidance of politics in Holocaust representations can be seen in the effort by curators to present as "neutral" a historical account of the Shoah as possible, eschewing any interpretive analysis of the underlying causes, preconditions, and precedents of genocide. *Memorialization* is pitted against *understanding* itself. " 'I don't believe that you could ever understand the Holocaust with the mind,' " remarked the architect of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. "You have to feel it. . . . Feeling may be a better way of getting at it because horror is not an intellectual category."[54]

In itself, such an emphasis on feeling is not a bad thing. By opening ourselves to an aesthetic dimension in our encounter with singularity,

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we may gain cathartic insight into the experiences of the victims of inhumanity. The existential vertigo created by our encounter with a horror that appears as pure "limitlessness" can interrupt the viewing subject's natural tendency to assimilate what is before him or her to the familiar, predictable, or routine. Allowing ourselves to feel connected to those who suffered and died, we may briefly suspend our personal preoccupations and concerns. Coupled with critical exegesis, the explanatory notes of a documentary or museum program, perhaps, such an aesthetic experience may bring us to a better "visceral" understanding of history and of the human condition. There is also something admirable in the desire to avoid historical reductionism or partisanship. Since we human beings cannot agree on anything, let alone politics, to offer a single interpretation of historical singularity, one might argue, would not only be to impose a certain violence on the phenomenon, but to disrespect the memory of the dead. One gets the sense that filmmakers like Spielberg see political agonism or debate as something dangerous in itself, as if creating a space of debate might invite just the sort of rancor and acrimony that led to the original violence and trauma.

Yet the desire to isolate the memorialization of mass trauma from politics or sociological interpretation seems short-sighted. Atrocities, after all, are the consequence of real-world ideologies, social practices, cultural norms, and so on. Fascism, for example, was rooted not only in anti-Semitism, but also in racism, ethnocentrism, militarism, masculinism, capitalism, and so forth.[55] It is therefore unclear whose interests are being served when we glide over elemental socioeconomic and political conditions and dynamics that give rise to genocidal practices. Pedagogically, it would seem to be as important to teach our youth about Stanley Milgram's findings on obedience to authority, say, as about the courage of Oskar Schindler.

Some curators do a better job than others in creating a space for the historical and political. To their credit, for example, the curators of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum situate the Hiroshima tragedy at least partially in the context of Japanese militarism. The museum tour narrative begins not with the arrival of the *Enola Gay*, but the role of the city in the overall Japanese war effort, and it mentions, at various points, the foreign slaves laboring in Hiroshima at the time. (After

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years of rancorous public debate, the museum eventually built a small memorial to the Korean slave laborers who perished in the bombing.) A further admirable feature of the museum is its "wide-angle" historical view, particularly its highly detailed account of the general science of atomic warfare, as well as of the American policy debate concerning the use of the new weapon. Most impressively, though, the museum maintains a vigorous academic research branch that goes well beyond historical research on the atom bomb to analyze contemporary international politics as well as the social origins of violent conflict in society.[56]

Whether in Japan or in the United States, however, some would rather not think about the politics of the atomic bombings at all. The following comment by the president of a steel company in Hiroshima probably expresses the feelings of others in Japan as well:

> Peace is the face of Hiroshima. Not the atom bomb, but peace. . . . What is peace? When people get together and have fun, that is what I call peace. . . . The [peace] festival is an incarnation of peace . . . but in this case peace means that which is *detached from ideological strife*.[57]

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, one finds an even more pronounced desire to avoid "ideological strife" in depicting the bombings. This can be seen in the controversial 1995 decision by the U.S. Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to cancel a planned exhibition at the U.S. National Air and Space Museum on the *Enola Gay*, which was to have included the views of revisionist historians who questioned the necessity of the atomic bombings. The Secretary explained that trying "to couple an historical treatment" of the U.S. experience in World War II with an "interpretation" of the atomic bombings had been a mistake:

> Veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis.[58]

The same dynamic—that is, of a powerful state trying to suppress "analysis" of an unpleasant event as a way to avoid taking responsibility for its past or present crimes—can of course be observed elsewhere, such as in Japan itself, where the conservative governing Liberal Democratic Party succeeded after the war "in incorporating

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local experiences of nuclear victimization into a national victimology,"[59] and in Israel, where the Shoah continues to serve as a "civil religion" grounding "ceremonials, myths, and creeds which legitimate the social order, unite the population, and mobilise the society's members in pursuit of its dominant political goals."[60]

But it is more typical for singularity to be used to reinforce the dominant myths of liberalism. Indeed, if there is a common pedagogical theme or message in Holocaust exhibits, it is a plea to spectators to practice vigilance toward "prejudice," intolerance, and so on. Thus, in designing the Holocaust Memorial Museum, planners consciously sought to assimilate the Holocaust experience to the *American* experience, as a way to celebrate "American" values like tolerance and democracy.[61] Exposure to mass atrocity is seen as being *in itself* a useful form of moral education. No part of most forms of Holocaust instruction concerns the nature of capitalism, the state, or how modern social structures and processes can unite to generate the sort of antisocial ethos—what Norman Geras terms a "contract of mutual indifference"—that makes mass killing possible or even inevitable.[62] Nor does one typically see any substantive discussion of *power*, either in the past or the present. The museum patron is not offered insights into the nature of the authoritarian personality or the relationship between economic displacments and extreme right-wing movements, or asked to contemplate the ways in which he or she may be colluding in oppression in the present.

Ironically, the liberal attempt to prevent a more robust conception of the political from entering the magic circle of singularity (thus contaminating the sacred) leaves representations of historical trauma vulnerable to the *dehumanizing* consequences of commodity aesthetics. For however much the curator or filmmaker may seek to inoculate singularity against the germ of politics, it cannot prevent it from coming into contact with the profane altogether. Like our encounter with an ineffable God, a being who by definition cannot be directly imagined, seen, or experienced, our encounter with singularity must nevertheless be concretely *mediated* through social institutions. And under conditions of advanced capitalism, where the primary social institution is neither the church nor the state, but capital, only by entering "into the circuits of the public sphere and commodity

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culture," as Rothberg puts it, can singularity be brought back down to earth.[63]

By the 1980s, American Jewish leaders, survivors, and intellectuals had succeeded in making the Shoah central to the cultural experience and identity of the United States. Cultural producers charged with educating the public about the Holocaust had by then realized that they would have to find a way to package that trauma in such a way that it would be intelligible and accessible to the masses. The incomprehensible magnitude of the terror and suffering had to be summoned and tamed at the same time. This tension, between depicting holocausts as being *both* particular and Absolute, *and* as something everyone can and should experience, has been "solved" by inviting the public to participate in consumable *spectacles.* As museum curators struggle to meet the demands of the new "Holocaust tourism"—in other words, to make mass atrocity accessible and even "enjoyable" to millions of people—they have had to adopt procedures and modes of engagement that have on the whole tended to compromise, rather than to protect, the integrity of the exhibits themselves.[64] At the Anne Frank House and Museum in Amsterdam, for example, originally the site of the Franks' extended confinement but now a site of international pilgrimage where the line of people waiting to enter the museum snakes around the block, planners have developed a rigid tour structure that essentially forces the patron to adhere to a predetermined path through the building. She or he cannot but feel processed, forced through a relentlessly linear maze of passages, stairs, rooms.[65] As Huyssens observes of the "disciplining of bodies" in today's museum display culture, "those refusing to be put into a state of active slumber by the walkman" are subjected to the museum's "more brutal tactics of overcrowding." The result is to render invisible the very art one has paid money to see—an invisibility that, according to Huyssens, is merely "the latest form of the sublime."[66]

In short, paradoxically, even as consumer capitalism sets in motion ever more elaborate and exaggerated *simulations* of holocaust, the more "realistic" the experience becomes, the more *false* it becomes. At the Anne Frank house, only museum employees arriving in the quiet, early morning hours, one imagines, could have any feeling for the

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piercing solitude and vulnerability of that place, the heavy stillness that must have filled the air as the occupants calmed themselves as Otto Frank's employees arrived at work. During the day, however, it is difficult to linger over particular artifacts, let alone to get any phenomenological sense of particular rooms, their aura and intimacy for those who once dwelled and worked inside them, while being shoved and jostled. What was once a private space has been brutally violated, turned into a public spectacle that feels strangely devoid of life.[67] One gawks at the Franks' personal artifacts, at the magazine photographs of movie stars glued to the wall by Anne, in what feels like voyeurism. The poignancy remains—but only as the after-image of our knowledge of the Frank family's fate. Finally, at the end of the Anne Frank tour, one can take home a souvenir of the Anne Frank franchise—books, videos, and postcards—from the elaborately stocked gift shop. Anne Frank and her family have been reduced to *kitsch*, if well-meaning and tasteful kitsch.[68]

The commodity in this way becomes the true point of translation between sacred and profane realms, the only way to mediate between personal moral reflection and institutionalized or state-sanctioned collective memory. Alas, singularity was destined to go this route under conditions of compulsory consumer capitalism. Separated from politics, it becomes in effect an extension of the society of the spectacle. As Mary McCarthy acidly observed in her critique of John Hersey's report on the bombing of Hiroshima in the *New Yorker*, the magazine, faced with the irreducible and unrepresentable, could "only assimilate the atomic bomb to itself, to Westchester County, to smoked turkey, and the Hotel Carlyle"—in other words, to the status of a bourgeois consumable.[69]

## IV

## Conclusion: Hiroshima, Intellectuals, and Remembrance

In 2005, peace activists from around the world gathered in Hiroshima for what was termed an International Solidarity Meeting to discuss the contemporary political significance of the atomic bombings. Among the speakers featured at the meeting, which had been organized by the Zenkoku Hibakusha Seinendomei, or Hibakusha Youth League

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(formed by children of the *hibakusha*, or atomic bomb survivors) was Reiko Shimoda, a *hibakusha*. Shimoda began by vividly describing her personal experience of the bombing (which took the lives of her mother and sister and many of her friends), but then went on to blame Japanese militarism for having sown the seeds of war. The origins of the war, and of Japanese responsibility for it, she said, have yet to be taught in the schools, or even discussed honestly within the peace movement itself. "Those who planned and began" World War II, "manipulating [the] military and politicians," were "the financial combines and big capitalists." But "[a]s for this fact[,] there is no description in any history books." Shimoda then connected past and present conflicts, criticizing the "shameless" efforts by then-Prime Minister Koizumi to further build up "the war system clearly seen before us," and drawing attention to the continued presence of U.S. military bases in Okinawa. Finally, she ended with a critique of U.S. war policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, saying that the thought of all the depleted uranium shells being used in those conflicts had left her feeling "frozen." So long as nuclear power and nuclear weapons are permitted, animals, plants, and human beings will never be able to "live symbiotically."[70]

Such an unapologetically political approach to the atomic bombings and to similar historical traumas of the past is all too rare. Far more typical are commemorative events that preserve singularity's horror, but otherwise empty it of all its meaning. Thus, in the early 1980s, during the period of the nuclear freeze movement, American peace activists would mark the anniversaries of the atomic bombings in Japan with events dominated by chanting Buddhist monks and by speakers who would solemnly condemn America's decision 40 years before to drop the bomb. But they always avoided any mention of Japan's role in the war, as if the bombs had literally dropped out of nowhere.

Nothing I have said here is meant to imply that the extermination of European Jewry and Gypsies, or the atomic bombings of Japan, were *not* unique in important ways, for example, the former as the paradigmatic instance of an attempt to eliminate entire peoples as such utilizing the machinery and technology of the modern state; the latter as a vast, wholly unprecedented scientific-technical experiment

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conducted on hundreds of thousands of utterly defenseless people.[71] Nor am I suggesting that remembering the past is not necessary and important. On the contrary, it is both natural and appropriate that places where human beings were murdered en masse, suffering unspeakably at the hands of other human beings, should be surrounded by an aura of the sacred, treated as sites for funerary rites and rituals of remembrance (e.g., such as the Cenotaph in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, which entombs the ashes of the tens of thousands of human beings obliterated on August 6, 1945). Indeed, not to attend to the experiences of the individuals obliterated by evil would be, in its own way, a sign of bad faith: of our unwillingness to take responsibility for the evil humans do, in order to glean some modest lessons from the past.

However, or so I have argued here, while commemoration of atrocity has its necessary place in our practices, meditation on past singularity in itself does no real work. It does not help the *hibakusha* in Japan or the destitute survivors of the Shoah. Nor does it help us to identify the institutions and structures in our own society that need to be changed if we expect to prevent future wars and atrocities, or to mitigate the suffering of the oppressed who now die each day in obscurity. Rather, it only confirms an abiding sense of our own reasonableness and moral probity in the present. By contrast, as LaCapra suggests, an authentic and socially redemptive "memory-work" would conceive memory and the past itself "in the present and future tenses."[72] For memory-work to be valid, that is, it would have to challenge our own habits of thoughtlessness, our own complicity in power. It would require us to be more vigilant to the ways in which narratives and discourses of the exceptional may overshadow the quotidian. In focusing on a "singular" event, however horrific and historically novel, we might ask ourselves, for example, what we may have unconsciously pushed into the background in doing so: genocide in Darfur, infant mortality in the third world, the atrocities committed on factory farms and in scientific laboratories, and so on. Dozens of memorials exist for the victims of the Holocaust, but none for the millions of children sacrificed on the altar of global capitalism and free trade. And where is the Museum of the Murdered Animal?

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Forty years ago, writing in *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse suggested that "domination [now] . . . extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives."[73] Today, his thesis seems justified, as the historic decline of critical social movements, the absorption of countercultural elements into consumer capitalism, and the continued erosion of the public sphere make it ever more difficult for society to acknowledge even the possibility of an alternative to the status quo. Even as holocaust tourism flourishes, society at large seems as resistant as ever to examining the casual systemic violence at its own core. As intellectuals confronting holocaust, our duty is therefore to uncover the ways in which quotidian sources of human evil are papered over, obscured, kept from troubling daily consciousness. We must also consider the ways in which *we ourselves* collude in practices of evil, in the present. Perhaps we do have some moral responsibility to attend the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and similar exhibits. But if we want to truly comprehend the meaning of "holocaust," the unspeakable suffering of it; if we furthermore desire to bear witness to extreme violence in such a way that we might actually prevent it, rather than merely aestheticize it post factum; then paying a visit to our own neighborhood slaughterhouse may be the more logical and morally urgent place to start.

**Notes**

1. Ionesco, *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, July 1956, qtd. in Marcuse (1968: 80).
2. Georges Bataille, "Residents of Hiroshima," reprinted in Caruth (1995: 229), cited in LaCapra (1994: 80n).
3. Mary McCarthy, "The Hiroshima 'New Yorker,' " *Politics*, Oct. 1946, qtd. in Bird and Lifschultz (1998: 303).
4. Novick (1999).
5. Rothberg (2000).
6. Quoted in Dietz (2000: 98).
7. Benhabib (2000: 75).
8. Bauman (1989).
9. Claude Lanzmann, qtd. in Rothberg (2000: 232).
10. Qtd. in Milchman and Rosenberg (1996: 137–138).
11. Qtd. in Rothberg (2000: 5).
12. Bauman (1989: 8).

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13. Novick (1999: 15).
14. LaCapra (2000: 93).
15. Crowther (1989: 148–149).
16. Kant (1952: 101, 90).
17. Kant (1952: 120).
18. Kant (1952: 92).
19. Kant (1952: 101).
20. Kant (1952: 91).
21. Kant (1952: 107).
22. Kant (1952: 122).
23. Kant (1952: 90).
24. Kant (1960: 46) as cited in Crowther (1989: 9).
25. Rothberg (2000: 41).
26. Crowther (1989: 21), emphasis added.
27. Crowther (1989: 148), emphasis added.
28. Qtd. in Novick (1999: 214).
29. Cole (1999: 97).
30. Novick (1999: 13).
31. Sartre (2002: 418).
32. Kant follows Edmund Burke in affirming that only from a position of safety are we able to experience the dynamical sublime. See Crowther (1989: 110).
33. Katz (1994, 2003). Only recently, indeed, has it become acceptable for scholars to explore the continuities and discontinuities between the Jewish experience and other historical instances of genocidal violence.
34. LeFebvre (1991: 123).
35. LeFebvre (1991: 130).
36. Rosenbaum (2007: A27).
37. Kant (1952: 96).
38. Kant (1952: 93).
39. Kant (1952: 97), emphasis added.
40. Kant (1952: 105).
41. Kant (1952: 121).
42. Mann (2006). On the ways in which modernity encourages feelings of narcissistic omnipotence in the subject at the expense of nature, see Balbus (2005: 121–122).
43. Press release issued by the Anti-Defamation League, October 14, 2003: http://www.adl.org/Pres/Rele/HolNa52/436652.
44. Press release issued by the Anti-Defamation League, October 14, 2003: http://www.adl.org/Pres/Rele/HolNa52/436662.
45. Qtd. in Patterson (2002: 53).
46. Patterson (2002); Derrida (2004).
47. Kant (1952: 105–106).

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48. Levy and Sznaider (2006: 52).
49. Finkelstein (2005: 5).
50. Mann (2004: ix).
51. LaCapra (1998: 8).
52. Kant (1952: 97, 94).
53. Weissman (2004: 23).
54. James Ingo Freed, qtd. in Weissman (2004: 210). Cf. Elie Wiesel, speaking in 1983 about the ideal museum of the Shoah: "I would like maybe a voice or a guide to speak softly, to whisper . . . 'look at the faces, look at them well. You don't understand, don't try. Just remember.' " Qtd. in Cole (1997: 170).
55. For a recent treatment of the origins of genocidal practices, see Semelin (2007).
56. The peace research conducted by the museum has periodically been a target of right-wing editorial attacks and even physical threats.
57. Yoneyama (1999: 62), emphasis added.
58. Qtd. in Harwit (1996: viii). See Heyman (1995: 8), qtd. online at http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/enola/about. Also Bird and Lifschultz (1998) and Nobile (1995).
59. Yoneyama (1999: 25).
60. Liebman and Don-Yehiha (1983: ix); qtd. in Cole (1999: 142). Adi Ophir warned his fellow Israelis that "a central altar has arisen which will gradually turn into our Temple, forms of pilgrimage are taking hold, and already a thin layer of Holocaust priests, keepers of the flame, is growing and institutionalising" Ophir (1987), qtd. in Cole (1999: 143).
61. Finkelstein (2005: 73).
62. Geras (1999).
63. Rothberg (2000: 27), qtd. in Vinebaum (n.d.: 2).
64. Young (1994: 38). Cited in Vinebaum (n.d.: 18).
65. Overcrowding is also a problem at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. See Rothberg (2000: 257).
66. Huyssens (1995: 23).
67. The tour's sense of human emptiness is heightened by the fact that the building's original furniture was confiscated during the war.
68. Huyssens (1995: 24).
69. McCarthy, qtd. in Bird and Lifschultz (1998).
70. Zenkoku Hibakusha Seinendomei (2007: 1–2).
71. The most personally chilling artifact I came across in the Hiroshima Peace Museum was one of the cylindrical capsules dropped by a second U.S. plane, the *Grand Artiste*, in the immediate aftermath of the atomic explosion: inside were carefully calibrated instruments designed by American scientists to measure the shock wave pressure, radiological, and other effects of the bomb.
72. LaCapra (1994: 16).
73. Marcuse (1968: 12).

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