JUNG-IN KWON

SIMULATING THE UNPRESENTABLE AND THE SUBLIME

There are many films that produce difficult emotions. Although film is a narrative and temporal art, it is also a form of visual art. The narration of plot is dramatized and made intelligible to audiences by means of the visual design and sequence of the film. Considering that the emotional responses of viewers are contingent upon narrative comprehension, it will not be an exaggeration to say that viewers' emotions toward narrative films are evoked by and made articulate in response to intriguing visual designs. I would like to analyze in detail an experimental film to clarify how the sublime is evoked in the process of narrative comprehension based on decoding of visual keys.

1. SUBLIME IN *LA JETÉE*

Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* is a striking anecdote of a man who travels into time in search of a woman from his childhood memory. In the opening scene, the protagonist, as a child, follows his parents to the Orly airport in Paris to see the take-off and landing of the airplanes. One Sunday, he witnesses a man dying at the pier of the airport, which is accompanied with a plane crash. At the end of the film, audiences come to know that in this scene they witness the death of the protagonist himself. Therefore, the film narrative involves a temporally incoherent plot. This is an intriguing narrative design. First, it elicits a bewilderment and puzzle in the audience, but at the same time, these disturbing emotions are what keep the audience glued to the film. In a word, the unsettling image is powerful enough to lead the viewers to seek the resolution of the puzzle.

The events of the film take place shortly after a third world war. Survivors of this nuclear conflict live underground and have become the victims of scientists who are experimenting with time travel. As human beings cannot find any residence in the contaminated space of this world, they are sent to the past and to the future to seek a postwar abode. Scientists send the victims to the past and the future by means of having them create mental images. The narrative consists of two episodes alternating throughout the film. One is the story in which the protagonist

A.-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), Analecta Husserliana LXXXVII, 55–63.
© 2005 Springer. Printed in the Netherlands.

is the subject of an experiment conducted by a group of future scientists. The other is a series of events that occur in the mental images of the protagonist that he created as the result of the experiment. These two seemingly separate narratives merge into one in the image of the man's death, in which I find the main theme of the film is expressed.

In this way, time is spatialized in that people are sent to the past and the future in search of an alternate place to live. 'Spatialized' here means being called into the mind as constitutive of the current stream of consciousness. This highly original process of evoking the images is what renders the past as the spatialized entity. Summoning the mental images of past or future transports the imaginer to a place. Among the underground victims, the protagonist was chosen because of his particularly strong mental powers. He has an obsessive memory of a woman he saw at the pier of the airport on the day he witnessed a plane crash and a man's death. The woman turns her face toward the protagonist when a crashing noise shakes the airport. The woman's face remains, in the protagonist memory, as his last peaceful image before the war. The past in the images is not a preexisting entity where we can literally make a journey.

Scientists first attempt to send the protagonist to the past, as the result of which images begin to appear. At first, peaceful scenes of the pre-war world appear. In the next images, we see the protagonist with the woman. They seem to have known each other, though the narrative does not inform us clearly of this. After the successful trip to the past, scientists now want to send him to the future. Our protagonist instead wishes to go back to the past in the hope of meeting the woman in his memory. His images lead him to the Orly airport on the Sunday when he saw the woman. He finds her at the end of the pier and runs toward her. When he almost reaches her, however, his movement is blocked by the head of the underground scientists. This last sequence takes us back to the opening sequence where the protagonist as a child witnessed a man's death. The spatialized past turns out to be temporally coincidental with the past event. This inconsistency elicits deep puzzle and intense but ineffable emotions.

Cynthia Freeland identifies the sublime in terms of four features: rapturous terror, astonishment, ineffable feeling, and moral reflection. In regard to the third feature, she states that the sublime evokes ineffable and painful feelings of great emotional intensity, which are transformed into pleasure and cognition. She does not, however, employ simulation theory in particular, but refers to cognitive neuroscience as the broad theoretical

framework that can provide a useful account of the cognitive resolution and the feeling of the sublime as its affective expression. *La Jetée*'s deliberately confounding narrative structure arouses a chilling incomprehension, an intellectual conundrum, and a necessary reflection, all of which may be seen as varieties of Freeland' s categories.

As it turns out that the protagonist has witnessed his own death, the film engages the gaze of the protagonist in an ambiguous way. Within the narrative, his gaze is directed toward the death of the man as an objectified incident. On the other hand, we can say that he is in a position to see his own end when he steps outside the narrative in which he is a part. Can a character be positioned outside a narrative? Perhaps it is only when the character is at the same time the narrator of the story. To resolve the puzzle of the temporal inconsistency, we must assign to the protagonist an extended role, as narrator and subject of narration. If audiences identify with the protagonist only as an agent of the series of actions within the narrative, they will achieve only a partial understanding of the film.

Another solution to the narrative inconsistency is to interpret *time* as the *space* where two incidents, which are extensionally identical, take place. As mentioned, time is spatialized in the sense that it has become the place for postwar human abode. The protagonist confronts his own death in his mental images of the past. He revisits the past, as he would visit a certain place, by evoking images of the past. He is at the pier of the airport where he first saw the woman. However, his move toward the woman is blocked. He is prevented from approaching the person of his obsessive memory. While seeing the blocked movement of the protagonist, we hear the voice of the narrator saying that one cannot escape time. Time resumes its characteristic temporal dimension by reaffirming its intrinsic property of irreversibility.

It seems that the death in this context is a metaphor for the frustration of his desire rather than a temporal endpoint. Why is he prevented from encountering the woman? His willing is in vain, because it is willing towards the past. The moment of desiring, which belongs to the present or a moment in the present, is headed towards the future. Desire is intrinsically future-oriented. In the journey to the past, it is not allowed for him to alter what belonged to the past. In the images he creates, he plays the role of an observer, rather than an agent who is willing and able to do things. Death is an incident in which spatialized time gains its temporality. His death is inevitable, since "*One cannot escape time.*"[1]

2. SIMULATION AND NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION

In the film *La Jetée*, we feel as if we were invited on a journey that eventually leads to where we started. The fact that we are puzzled indicates that the film at its surface level does not provide us with sufficient clues for appropriate comprehension. In other words, what the film shows for our visual and auditory perception does not contain all the information relevant to understanding the fictional narrative. Along with this cognitive difficulty, the initial puzzle engenders phenomenally intense emotions, for the more puzzling and intriguing a narrative, the more intense and powerful are the emotions it arouses. The intense emotion is in a sense ineffable, in that it does not fit into any determinate cognitive criterion of an emotion.

The asymmetry between cognitive responses and affective responses to the film requires investigation. On the cognitivist theory of emotions, emotions are complexes of feeling states and cognitive states. This approach emphasizes the correlation between cognitive states and feeling, and rationalizes emotions in terms of the grounding beliefs and thoughts. Cognitivist views, however, do not handle well the complexity of feeling states associated with indeterminate cognitive states. If a feeling component must have an identifiable cognitive counterpart, how can we explain the fact that cognitive difficulty accompanies intense feelings such as those that mark the sublime? Moreover, the initially ineffable feeling becomes more and more fine-grained as we gain more insight about the narrative. Can a cognitivist approach give an account of this dynamic development of the emotions?

I consider simulation theory as an alternative cognitive theory of emotion. It explains emotions as elicited through dynamic mental acts of the audiences. Emotions are aroused by means of an imaginative projection into the situation of another. According to Richard Wollheim, we are centrally imagining the characters' thinking and feeling from their point of view. Similarly, Gregory Currie states that we impersonally imagine the protagonist to see things from his situation, without introspectively referring to our states. The main character in the film *La Jetée* is sent to the past through the images that he creates. His mental images are the passages through which he can visit the past and the future. In this film, it is a crucial insight to realize that the protagonist is given the role of the narrator. It is necessary to shift the perspective from that of the character within the narrative to that of the narrator outside the narrative.

On simulation theory, it is by entertaining prepositional thoughts that we feel genuine emotions toward fictional works. But one of the peculiarities of the sublime is that we can hardly identify the cognitive components that causally affect feeling states. How can simulation theory handle this peculiarity? The merit of simulation theory is that it considers the imaginative mental act itself, rather than identifiable thought contents, as efficient in eliciting an aesthetic emotion. Simply put, simulation theory examines closely the process of formulating thoughts to give an account of the manner in which we search into appropriate thought contents. This aspect of simulation theory allows us legitimately to extend the scope of the objects of simulation. As we already examined, the sublime is accomplished through simulating an extended target. Despite the commonly held view that simulation is a mechanism of empathy, simulation is not simply identifying with the character within the narrative, nor putting oneself into the situation depicted in the narrative.

The idea of going beyond the narrative boundary is consonant with the aim of central imagination or impersonal imagination. If the protagonist is the sole target of simulation, it is hard to understand the film. Our protagonist is at the edge of the narrative, which means that he cannot be the reference point from which the narrative is unfolded consistently. We have to extend the target of simulation from the character to the narrator. Confronting the limit of an imaginative projection into the character's situation, audiences realize that our initial imagination is not properly central in Wollheim's terms. Part of the reason is the disparity between what we believe is the protagonist's inner states and what the narrative attributes to him. If central imagination is imagining someone from his situation, not from our point of view, then we have to in the memory belongs to time. As the narrator observes, "*Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. They are only made memorable.*"[2]

3. THE UNPRESENTABLE

Extending the target of simulation beyond the narrative characterizes the reflective nature of simulation. To justify and clarify the claim to the extended simulation, I endorse Jean-François Lyotard's interpretation of the Kantian sublime. As a major postmodern theorist, Lyotard characterizes postmodern artworks as evoking the sublime, rather than beauty. His target artworks of postmodern sublime are avant-garde paintings, especially abstract paintings of the 50's and 60's American artists.

In the early twentieth century, paintings began to give way to photography as a means of pictorial representation of objects. Paintings lost their traditional role and began exploring various ways of expressing the negation of representation. Avant-garde artists, notably abstract expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman tried to evoke what was hidden behind the representational plane of traditional paintings. Lyotard calls the negated dimension 'the unpresentable', which is considered as the theme of the avant-garde paintings.[3] The sublime is intrinsically the feeling elicited in response to such a negative representation.

In the film *La Jetée*, time is represented in a spatialized dimension. The death of the protagonist is a pictorial representation of the idea that one cannot break the logic of time. His frustrated journey into the past is given expression in a physical movement that consider a broader point of view in order to get more lucid insight into the character. Alternating point of views or moving towards the narrative text and then moving away from it is the very nature of reflective engagement.

Central imagination does not necessarily imply that I have similar or the same mental states as the protagonist. If we could compare my cognitive and affective states with those of the characters, then a character identification model makes more sense. However, we do not have any means to compare them. This is because characters' mental states are animated by an imaginative participation on the part of the audiences, rather than determined from the first. Certainly, characters are the creations of the artist, but this does not mean that the scope of psychological participation is restricted to what the artist intended. If the artist omnisciently determines the psychological states of the characters, we have only faithfully to imitate those states attributed by the artist to the character.

If simulating a particular character does not solve the question the narrative poses, we have to adjust the target of simulation. We need to extend the scope of simulation from the characters, (more properly, their mental states delineated by the depiction in the narrative) to an invisible storyteller or omniscient narrator. Such an extended simulation enables the audience to make a deeper conjecture about the narrative. For instance, it is not part of the information that the surface narrative of the film *La Jetée* delivers that temporal dimension is spatialized, somewhat like the places one can reside in. However, it is not even enough for narrative comprehension to reach the idea that time is spatialized. Such a reading may mislead us into thinking that every episode that takes place in a spatialized time, or in the images created by the protagonist,

are immune from temporal logic. But the very moment of desiring or willing to go back to the past to reside occupies a physical space. Time can only be represented through a spatial dimension, since time belongs to the realm of the so-called "unpresentable" in Lyotard's terms. The powerful emotion that the last scene evokes is, therefore, the sublime that is grounded in the narrative that visually presents the unpresentable, namely time and its irreversible logic.

Visual narrative artwork, such as film, addresses visual perception as the primary source of narrative comprehension. What is represented in the fiction is given meaning by way of audiences' perceptual experiences and cognitive organization based on perception. How, then, can we visually represent the irreversibility of time? What can be the significant visual designs that deliver an idea of what is intrinsically unpresentable? The director transformed the temporal dimension into a three-dimensional physical space. Events in the image space can be pictorially represented on screen in a cinematic medium. With this ingenious transformation, he delivers the message that time is not to be reversed, which is represented with the sequences of spatially blocked movements.

Comprehension of the narrative with such a complex artistic design is possible only when we take a broader perspective than that of the protagonist in the film. It may be the omniscient narrator that we identify with. This is the target of simulation that the audiences of this film should aim at, if they attempt to construct a coherent narrative from the visual perception the film provides. In a sense, audiences are encouraged to identify with the omniscient narrator rather than with the protagonist. As the omniscient narrator is not part of the narrative content, the simulation in this case is directed to an extended target, for which reason I call it an extended simulation. In such an extended simulation, the affective response of the audience is not solely based on what is initially represented in the narrative. It is rather grounded in what is not presented or what the omniscient narrator can see and understand.

The sublime *La Jetée* evokes is grounded in what is not visually represented in the fictional narrative. The emotional response is accompanied with comprehending the narrative as the representation of the unpresentable. The process of such a comprehension consists of proper simulation, whose target is the omniscient narrator. How do we, then, identify with the omniscient narrator? How do we take the perspective of the omniscient narrator? Recalling Kant's remark about the feeling of the sublime, we can say that simulation is a dynamic psychological process of the vicissitude of cognitive states. According to Kant, sublime feeling

is compared to the alternating of attraction to and repulsion from one and the same center. Alternating cognition refers to the dynamic process of cognition in which progress and regress in understanding alternates.

4. SPIRALING SUBLIME

When we approach the entire narrative with the multiple readings I illustrated, we feel an intense and complex emotion aroused in the course of the narrative comprehension. I consider this feeling the sublime. It is aroused in accompany with the strenuous efforts to understand clearly the narrative text. Also, the feeling is phenomenally dynamic, as well as complex and heterogeneous, in that it becomes more and more finely tuned as we gain more insight into the narrative unfolding. The emotions evoked by this sort of obscurity are characterized more by their phenomenal quality than by cognitive understanding. Burke defines the sublime as delight from a moderated painful feeling still tinged with horror. This illustrates aptly the distinct phenomenal aspect of the sublime.

We can explain the reciprocity between the cognitive and phenomenal uniqueness of the sublime with Kant's conceptual analysis of the imagination in his "Analytic of the Sublime." As a catalyst of ordinary conceptual cognition, imagination bridges the gap between unorganized sensations and perceptual and conceptual understanding. When the imagination proceeds not in an ordinary way, it often generates pleasurable feelings. Those objects that do not fall under ordinary conceptual demarcation of the understanding hinder the imagination from proceeding smoothly from perceptual data to conceptual organization. To properly understand the object, we have to take an optimal perspective from which we can see the object adequately. Proper posturing itself depends on relevant knowledge about the object, despite the ironic situation that it is the proper knowledge of the object that we are searching for.

The sublime *La Jetée* evokes is grounded in what is not visually represented in the fictional narrative. The emotional response is accompanied with comprehending the narrative as the representation of the unpresentable. The process of such a comprehension consists of proper simulation, whose target is the omniscient narrator. How do we, then, identify with the omniscient narrator? How do we take the perspective of the omniscient narrator? Recalling Kant's remark about the feeling of the sublime, we can say that simulation is a dynamic psychological process of the vicissitude of cognitive states. According to Kant, sublime feeling is compared to the alternating of attraction to and repulsion from one

and the same center. Alternating cognition refers to the dynamic process of cognition in which progress and regress in understanding alternates.

I describe this process by means of a metaphor of a spiral motion. "Spiral simulation" enables the audience to take the omniscient narrator's perspective, which provides a more coherent way of constructing the narrative than the protagonist's. It is the pure idea of the irreversibility of time that the narrator reveals as the relevant cue to a coherent narrative comprehension. The powerful and intense affective response on the part of audiences is produced in the course of entertaining the thought of the intrinsic nature of time. In this sense, we are able to see the film as a visual representation of what is unpresentable. The powerful and ineffable emotion that seizes the mind of the audience is the sublime.

Humboldt State University

NOTES

[1] *La Jetée: Script* <http://cs.art.rmit.edu.au/projects/media/marker/Script-_La_Jetee_354.html>

[2] *op. cit.*

[3] According to Lyotard, avant-garde painting eludes the aesthetics of the sublime that is not governed by a consensus of taste, whose products seem "monstrous," "formless," purely "negative" entities. He uses terms by which Kant characterizes those objects that give rise to a sense of the sublime. Jean-François Lyotard, "Presenting the unpresentable," *Artforum* 20, 8 (April 1982), 67–8.