

TRAUMA, CIVILIZATION, REPRODUCTION

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Abstract: On March 11, 2011, a large earthquake struck Japan and was followed by a series of devastating tsunamis. One of these tsunamis triggered an explosion at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. March 11 was a natural catastrophe (that civilization failed to prevent) on one hand, and a manmade catastrophe (that civilization created and made worse) on the other. The catastrophe was said to be unprecedented and singular. What does it mean to speak/write about a singular event? How did I / we experience this event? A phenomenological analysis leads us to the complex relationship between nature and civilization on one hand, and the problem of trauma experience on the other. A traumatic experience is essentially singular, but it can be reproduced in language, and even more today with the help of (civilization) technology, in visual images that can be recorded, reproduced, repeated, and sent to far corners of the earth. This reproducibility can help us to integrate the trauma within the normal flow of time, but it also conceals from us the root of the trauma and the possibilities of new trauma.

Keywords: Trauma, civilization, reproduction, phenomenology, disaster, Fukushima, technology, Husserl, Benjamin, Levinas.

Resumen: El 11 de marzo de 2011, un gran terremoto azotó Japón y fue seguido por una serie de devastadores tsunamis. Uno de estos tsunamis provocó una explosión en la planta de Energía Nuclear de Fukushima Daiichi. Lo del 11 de marzo fue, por un lado, una catástrofe natural (que la civilización podía evitar) y, por otro lado, una catástrofe provocada por el hombre (que la civilización ha originado y ha empeorado). Se dice que la catástrofe es singular y sin precedentes. ¿Qué significa hablar/escribir acerca de un acontecimiento singular? ¿Cómo experimentamos nosotros este acontecimiento? Un análisis fenomenológico nos lleva a la compleja relación entre la naturaleza y la civilización, por un lado, y al problema de la experiencia de trauma por el otro. Una experiencia traumática es esencialmente singular, pero puede ser reproducida en lenguaje —y más hoy incluso con la ayuda de la (civilización) tecnología— en imágenes visuales que se pueden grabar, reproducir, repetir y enviar a lejanos rincones de la Tierra. Esta reproducción puede ayudarnos a integrar el trauma dentro del flujo normal del tiempo, pero también ocultarnos la raíz de los traumas y las posibilidades de nuevos traumas.

Palabras clave: Trauma, civilización, reproducción, fenomenología, desastre, Fukushima, tecnología, Husserl, Benjamin, Levinas.

PREFACE

March 11, 2011, was an unforgettable day for Japan.

At 2:46 p.m., a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck the northeastern coast of Honshu, our main island, and was followed by a series of devastating tsunamis that ultimately caused meltdowns in three nuclear reactors at the Fukushima

Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant only 200 kilometers north of Tokyo. Hundreds of kilometers of coastline were devastated on that day and nearly 20,000 people lost their lives. Many, many more lost families, friends, homes, communities and their livelihoods. In addition to damage from the earthquake and tsunamis, a wide area around the power plant was badly contaminated, forcing the evacuation of tens of thousands of people aside from those directly hit by the earthquake and tsunamis. Even a year after the disaster, more than 300,000 people remained unable to return to their homes, industry and infrastructure across northeastern Japan were in tatters, the damaged reactors were still unstable, and the land around them was seriously –possibly irreparably– contaminated.

Sitting atop the meeting place of four tectonic plates, Japan is accustomed to geological disasters. 3/11, however, was more than a natural disaster. It was a complex mixture of natural and manmade calamities caused, in part, by a byproduct of what we call “civilization”.

The concept of “civilization” (*bunmei* 文明) is a fairly recent import to Japan. Arriving from the West, the idea of civilization was popularized in Japan toward the end of the nineteenth century in the form of a social and political movement called *bunmei kaika* or “awakening of civilization”. “Civilization” in this case meant “modernization”, “industrialization” and “technology”, (which Japan did not have) and these were the goals that Japan steadfastly and enthusiastically pursued over the next century and a half. Accordingly, it was this idea of civilization that was shaken to its foundations by the multiple catastrophes of March 11.

Everyone has something to say about what happened that day. One of our philosophers remarked that most of the talk is mere *yotabanashi*: the “talk of fools”. Offhand as this may sound, I am inclined to agree with him –provided that we understand “talk of fools” in a specific way.

By “talk of fools” I do not refer to *Gerede* or idle chatter. “Talk”, “discussion”, “conversation” –all of these have to do with language. Language –the word “dog” for example– can refer to any individual dog, because its “meaning” is general (referring to species, genus etc.), universal and repeatable. But how does language relate to unique and singular occurrences? Windelband’s textbook distinction marks a boundary between the natural and historical sciences, the former being “nomothetic” (positing general laws) and the latter “idiographic” (describing concrete and unique events). *Idio*, of course, is the root of “idi-

om" and means "peculiar" or "private". "Idiographic", being a combination of *idio* and *graphic* (from *graphein* –to "engrave" or "write"), refers to the marking down of something that is peculiar, singular and unique, by means of language, which is general, universal and repeatable.

Words like "unprecedented" and "unparalleled" were used with great frequency in describing March 11. It was certainly a day that demanded an idiographic description. But for many of those who experienced the events, the experience was not so much idiographic as simply unspeakable –beyond language. Not merely particular, but *truly singular*: without precedence and without parallel, and therefore unspeakable and indescribable by means of language. The linguistic description (*graphein*) of a truly singular (*idio*) event is a contradiction in terms –contrary to reason and the "talk of fools"– "a tale told by an idiot".

I referred above to "those who experienced the events". But who are they? The victims of the disaster? Do they include me? The area where I live was seriously affected by liquefaction (where the quaking of the earth turns previously solid ground into a sea of mud), and although my home was not badly damaged, the government sent me a "disaster victim certificate". This puts me at the fringe of victimhood, I suppose, although I did not experience March 11 in that way. I would not have been able to *experience* it in any case, since a truly singular event cannot be experienced then, or afterward described.

This paper will be "a tale told by an idiot". I write it because it seems to me that to tell –or retell– the untellable is the task of civilization and of us philosophers.

1. NATURE AND CIVILIZATION

Nature visited great destruction on us in the form of a huge earthquake and tsunami, and our civilization was not strong enough to avert it. Our manmade structures –including the world's largest seawall– were easily swept away. The brute force of nature, previously hidden from us by the veil of civilization, suddenly "appeared" to us in all its nakedness. Or perhaps it was always there to see, indirectly, as a trace. It was our knowledge that failed us, by leading us to ignore or overlook it. Most people will agree, I think, that we should have seen

what we did not. Yet there are some presuppositions behind this statement –about seeing and not seeing– that must be reconsidered.

1. "Appearing"

Before concerning ourselves with civilization and nature, we need to reconsider what it means to "appear"¹. Appearance is not merely the result of a physical cause-effect relationship. Think of a fish that lives in the water and has never been out of it. Does the water "appear" to the fish as "water"? I think not. Only when the fish has the misfortune to find itself in the air or on land will the water appear to it as water. For something to "appear", a difference or differentiation is needed.

The importance of "difference" has been considered common sense since the days of structuralism, but I want to emphasize again how necessary difference is for something to "appear". Nothing appears in a featureless landscape. It is interesting that the starting point for structuralism was *language*. Since ancient Greece, language has been traditionally linked to *apophansis* (proposition), which includes the root *pha*, meaning "light" or "appearing". Language/propositions have the ability to "illuminate" or to "bring to appearance" truths, and even falsehoods. Language works by bringing differences into the light and thus making them appear.

Language relates in this way to "appearing" and so does perception. With regard to "appearing", language sits on top of perception so to speak, in a complex relationship of harmony and conflict. Structuralist linguistics focused mainly on the structure of difference between linguistic elements (let us call this the "horizontal" relationship), but the consideration of "appearance" leads us into another dimension –that of perception– where the relationship of difference expands "vertically" to another level. With regard to "appearance", the vertical relationship is more important than the horizontal one.

The change in levels can bring about conflict (for example, in the case of a falsehood); nevertheless, language and perception influence each other in producing "appearance". We live "between" language and perception, so to speak. Language without perception and perception without language are barely imag-

¹ "Appearing" in this case does not refer to "appearing" as opposed to "being", but to the "appearing" that precedes the dichotomy of "being" and mere "appearance". In old Japanese, the two are not differentiated and to "appear" is to "be".

inable, but even these would be situated at the very limits of the between, which is to say, they *belong* to the between and are not outside it. Each is still subject to the influence of the other. The “between” of language and perception is the range of their reciprocal and oscillating influence. This “between” is where we live.

Language does not merely copy perception. Something appears to perception and language makes it appear again, but at another level. A well-cited example is the seven-colored rainbow². Language influences or promotes the way things appear to perception, and it also works in another way, by hiding things from perception. Observing the movement “between” perception and language, we see the two sometimes working together in harmony and continuity to promote an appearance, and sometimes against each other, in conflict and discontinuity. This ambivalence makes it possible for language to sometimes work beyond perception to bring about the appearance of something new.

The same relationship holds between civilization and nature. Civilization illuminates certain aspects of nature, but it suppresses and conceals others. Terms like “ecological” and “carbon dioxide emission reduction” seemingly place civilization in harmony with nature, but they conceal something else. On March 11, a concealed (or forgotten) aspect of nature appeared to us as an extreme force that was hostile to civilization. Soon afterwards, civilization showed itself as a different kind of extreme and hostile force.

2. Perception and language

The Japanese word for “civilization” —*bunmei* 文明— originally came to us from ancient China as a term indicating enlightenment (明) through the writings (文) of Confucius. In the nineteenth century, the same expression was used to translate the Western concept of civilization, which at that time was linked to French enlightenment philosophy and nineteenth-century European ideals of social refinement and modern comfort. It functioned as an ideology, and in this sense, tended to conceal certain aspects of reality. Concealment, however, should not be equated with falsehood. Language that makes too many false claims loses its power. Powerful words and concepts are those that make specific aspects of reality “appear,” even as they conceal others. This is the essence

² Cfr. the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which we will not discuss here.

of the power of language.

The power of language over perception can be summarized in three points. (There is a fourth, which I will bring up later.)

First, language can illuminate specific events of perception and make them “appear”. This power seems almost magical from the rationalistic outlook of modern science, but the power of civilization is related to this power.

Secondly, there is already a difference, and therefore a conflict, between perception and what is illuminated by language. This is the narrative power of language. The relationship between language and perception is not a simple one of agreement or disagreement.

Thirdly, whatever can be expressed by language, language can make appear.

This third point takes us to the question of what *cannot* be expressed by language.

2.1. Kant

Kant’s theory focused on the influence that language has on appearance. One of his most famous theses is: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”³, “concepts” indicating language (or categories) in this case, while “intuitions” are what is given by sensation or perception. In Kant, the latter do not have a linguistic structure. Phenomena (appearances) are possible only when the two work together. Language provides only the form and does not influence the content of the intuition as it does in the Sapir-Whorf theory of the way we see a seven-colored rainbow. Nevertheless, the influence of concepts (language) is decisive in the following way:

Kant draws a stern line between “intuitions” (sensation) and “concepts” (understanding). Sensation provides only a disjointed and un-unified “manifold”⁴, whereas the understanding has not only language (categories), but the ability to integrate or synthesize⁵. It takes the disjointed manifold given by sensation and joins them (strictly speaking, through the mediation of a “schema”), making the appearance of a unified phenomenon possible. This is the decisive

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (hereafter *KrV*), Hamburg, Meiner, 1998, B p. 75.

⁴ The idea that the senses give us only bits and pieces is actually quite astonishing.

⁵ “Die Verbindung (conjunctio) eines Mannigfaltigen überhaupt, kann niemals durch Sinne in uns kommen [...]. So ist alle Verbindung [...] eine Verstandeshandlung, die wir mit der allgemeinen Benennung Synthesis belegen würden [...]” (*KrV* B, p. 129).

point. Without the understanding (that is, language), the impressions provided by sensation fall apart and there is no “experience”.

In addition to this, Kant recognizes another unifying function: that of the “I”. If the understanding already has that function, why is the “I” necessary? This is a question we will come back to.

All of the above belongs to the realm of the “transcendental”, by which Kant means that they precede experience and make it possible. Now, the events of March 11 would seemingly be integrated within this framework as an experience. But were they?

2.2. Husserl

Husserl was critical of Kant’s separation of concepts and understanding (language) from intuitions and sensation (perception). For Husserl, intuitions included “categorical intuitions,” which are intuitions with a linguistic structure. He went even further in regarding perception (experience) as the foundation of language. The latter arises from the former. This refutes the Kantian idea that integration and synthesis are achieved only by the understanding. A “passive synthesis” is already at work in intuition (perception), said Husserl. This was a very important insight on his part.

What then of the influence of language on perception? Husserl probably would not have recognized any influence on the formal aspects of language, such as its grammar and logical structure. However, with regard to the content—the *meaning*—of language, he does recognize its influence, at least indirectly, in his discussion of the effect of astronomical science on perception⁶. A specific example is the way we see the stars of the skies: the meanings of our perceptions change when we see them as solar and stellar eclipses, comets and meteors—that is, as astronomical phenomena. This change is brought about by the language of astronomy.

Is there such a thing as a perception that is completely untouched by language? This question can be answered only in a roundabout way. To answer it directly (in the affirmative), we would have to confirm the existence of a perception that is completely cut off from language. To put it another way, we

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana* (hereafter *Hua*) (Martinus Nijhoff), Vol. IX, p. 57. In a serious consideration of the history of meanings, it would be further necessary to distinguish between sedimentation and reactivation, and forgetfulness and recollection with regard to this influence.

would have to excavate an untouched and buried perception and make it appear to us. Phenomenology claims to undertake an “archaeology” of sorts that begins on the surface of the Here and Now and digs down to what is buried underneath. But how can it do this without contaminating the untouched with something from the surface (such as language)?⁷.

What is an “untouched” perception? Is it a Kantian intuition, made up of disjointed sensual impressions? Phenomenology does not recognize such a thing⁸. It is probably something closer to the perception of a young child, but pursuing this possibility immediately leads to the morass of psychological misconceptions. What exactly is a “young child”? How old is that child? Old enough to speak a language? Or is it a newborn infant? Should we rely on child psychologists—or possibly animal psychologists—and their precise instruments of observation and measurement for the necessary data about such perceptions? No—because this way of thinking is based on a misconception of the phenomenological method.

Husserl was indeed trying to excavate pre-linguistic perception, but he was not pursuing a perception that can be observed from without (such as the perception of a pre-linguistic child). Observation from the outside has been suspended (*epochéed*) at the beginning of the phenomenological procedure (the transcendental reduction). What Husserl pursues is a reflective perception of the “I”. More precisely, he was trying to describe, from within the I, how its perception comes to be. Thus, what we reach after digging down into the genetic structure of the I is still an I—a “primal” I.

Husserl excavated the experience of the I through reflection. Through reflection, he discovered that language is founded on perception, but that the meanings of language also influence perception. There is a movement between language and perception; that place “in between” is where phenomenology operates. Thus, for phenomenology, the idea of a completely untouched perception is a distortion born of scientism (which is based on the idea that one can stand outside of things).

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the “silent cogito” and “spoken cogito” relate to this problem.

⁸ Some scholars regard Husserl’s *hyle* as corresponding to this, but I think Husserl’s analyses of the passive synthesis indicate otherwise.

3. *Civilization and writing*

The relationship between language and perception is repeated, even more dynamically (although with some differences), between civilization and nature. Both nature and civilization lie within the range of their reciprocal and oscillating influence. Nature lies at the foundation of civilization, but civilization can also influence nature.

The East Asian term for “civilization” is 文明 and is shared by the Japanese, Chinese and Koreans, although the term is pronounced differently in each country. 文 means “writing” and points to the importance of writing for civilization. Writing (in comparison to oral language) adds to the power of language to preserve and to repeat. Preserved (recorded) words can be retrieved and repeated at will. If we recall Husserl’s assertion that ideal objects, like those of geometry, are transmitted primarily through writing, we see that writing is also an important theme for phenomenology⁹.

Civilization –like language– *constrains* perception to a degree, but it also *liberates*, in the sense that it brings to appearance certain things that could not appear without its help. Furthermore, those of us who have been marked and taught by civilization are able to use its powers to create new appearances, which in their turn lead to the next. Civilization breeds appearances, which breed appearances of their own.

2. WHAT DID WE EXPERIENCE ON MARCH 11?

Let us go back to the question: What did we experience on March 11? This is a question that could be answered from the viewpoint of a cultural or intellectual history. For example, the Great Lisbon Earthquake is said to have had a wide-ranging effect on the intellectual development of Europe. The effects of March 11 will no doubt be studied in the same way, from an objective outside viewpoint. But here, I want to look at the event from within –and therefore, from within our own civilization– to ask again: What was it?

March 11 was called an “unprecedented” disaster. “Unprecedented” means

⁹ This does not mean that oral language cannot found a civilization. Nevertheless, there is an important link between writing and civilization.

that it never happened before, that it was incomparable, that it was truly singular. But this singular occurrence was experienced all over the world in the form of visual images. Our modern civilization (technology) has made it possible to send images to faraway places in the blink of an eye.

Visuals of the earthquake showed airport ceilings falling apart and streets turning into rivers of mud. The earthquake came so suddenly that there were not many visual recordings, but people had more warning before the tsunamis: the terrifying waves were recorded in many places, by many people. They were shown and seen by many, many more. We all saw houses being crushed and swept away, and watched people being taken by the waves. The “singular” event was witnessed by countless people, simultaneously. Repeatedly.

“Universal” is one antonym for “singular,” but “reproducible” is another. With regard to language, written words are particularly favorable to reproduction. In Europe after Gutenberg, the reproducibility became remarkable. There is a difference between universality and reproducibility in that the former is ideal and the latter is real, but they have much in common in their contrast to singularity.

Let us refer here to Walter Benjamin’s theory of art. According to Benjamin, the unique artworks of former times were accompanied by an “aura”, which copies and reproductions do not have. To the contrary, reproductions are “a relentless destruction of the aura of their creation”¹⁰, he writes. Benjamin regarded cinematic films as being representative of this loss of aura.

The video images of March 11 were not cinema, but live broadcasts. Nevertheless, they were recorded, edited, copied and replayed, to be seen again and again on news programs, YouTube, etc. In Benjamin’s time, newsreels shown in movie houses corresponded to today’s news programs and he remarked on their “repeatability” as a major attribute, but today’s news programs are even more so. What most of us “experienced” were *repetitions*.

What then of the “singularity” of March 11? Despite the repetition of reproduced images, the catastrophe itself was nevertheless singular, I think. However, the reason for its singularity was not its irreproducibility, but its frightfulness. It was fright that made the event unique.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007, p. 43.

3. FRIGHT (*SCHRECK*)

Freud wrote about "fright" (*Schreck*). What is it exactly? Let us go back to Kant for a moment.

1. "One" and "unique"

According to Kant, sensation (intuition) provides only a disjointed and un-unified manifold that is brought together only by the understanding (concepts). Both are transcendental functions that precede experience; the latter works by integrating data provided by the senses. That would seem enough to form the basis of experience, but Kant adds another unifying function, out of prudence or perhaps anxiety: the "I" of the transcendental apperception. This I, being transcendental, precedes experience and therefore makes it possible. It is an ultimate defense mechanism, impermeable to the adverse effects of experience on the integrity of the ego.

Husserl, too, after great consideration, recognized in the ego a "centralizing" function. Kant accords the I a "numerical unity" (*numerische Einheit*)¹¹, but Husserl speaks of its "uniqueness" (*Einzigkeit*)¹². Or, to be more exact, he speaks of the uniqueness of the primal-I, which is the bottommost stratum of the I. "Numerical unity" and "uniqueness" are not the same thing. Husserl's "uniqueness" is not a matter of number, but is something that precedes numbers and is essentially inexpressible in language. Expressing it in language would be no more than an equivocation (*Äquivokation*)¹³, he says. In purely formal terms, it refers to the uniqueness of the one and only locus of appearance out of which the I cannot step.

¹¹ Kant considered the possibility of a numerical multiplicity (i.e. fragmentation or dissociation) of the I and asserted its "numerical unity" to counteract that possibility. For Kant, "numbers" issue from "time" as a form of the inner sense. Heidegger presented the "I" as arising out of a reflexive circular movement of time. This would mean that the numerical unity of the "I" originates transcendently in the "uniqueness" of time. But an I born of such a reflexive and circular movement before experience would be closed in upon itself. To be sure, a closed circuit is safe and well defended. Husserl's concept of transcendental unity is different (and less safe), where the I is established within the transcendental experience.

¹² In *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, § 54b (Hua VI, p. 188) Husserl refers to the uniqueness of the primal-I. This uniqueness is related to the uniqueness of the world (*ibidem*, § 37, p. 146).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

Now, does the unique primal-I have the ability to unify and integrate? This leads us to another matter that is already implied by the word “primal”: the passive synthesis. Husserl saw the passive synthesis at work in the intuition, precedent to the (active) synthesis such as that of Kant’s understanding. He meant that an *elemental* synthesis (integration) is already at work in the substratum of the primal-I.

The I integrates itself. After this integration, it can be said to be “numerically one”. However, the “uniqueness” of the primal-I precedes that numerical oneness. According to Husserl, the I arises out of that uniqueness by “auto-affectation” (*Selbst-affektion*) —a special kind of self stimulation that gives birth to the I.¹⁴ The I carries on from the passive synthesis, actively developing and strengthening it. If the passive synthesis of the primal-I can be referred to as a kind of “nature” at work, then we might say that the Husserlian I carries on from nature. However, because it is open to nature at its lowest stratum, Husserl’s I is more vulnerable than Kant’s.

March 11 was an event that damaged the synthesizing function of the I, which is the ultimate condition for the possibility of experience. Experience was no longer experience, but disjointed events lacking unity. The ego had no words for it, could not tell a story. Kant intended the I to be an ultimate defense mechanism against disjointed reality, but in the face of catastrophe and fright, it sometimes fails the test.

2. *Fright and trauma*

Freud observed the phenomenon of fright in patients who had been traumatized¹⁵, and who suffered from flashbacks and compulsive repetition disorders. When the I is properly in control of the constitution of time, memories can be retrieved repeatedly from the past at will, or be left unretrieved, and they can be verbalized. But flashback memories assail without warning. They can be neither controlled nor verbalized. The I is powerless against them. Repetition is

¹⁴ The primal-I is both the primal movement and also the place by which and where “appearance” takes place, but it is ordinarily concealed deep under the I. It appears only through a very thorough self-reflection, or when the I is badly damaged. At the same time, it is by grace of its link to the primal-I that a damaged I can sometimes revive or heal. But the integrity of the primal I is not rock-solid; it is elemental and thus prone to tiny cracks (primal divisions). It is this delicate balance of integrity and division that makes the I possible.

¹⁵ See, for example, Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York, Basic Books, 1992, is another classic study of trauma, although the controversy regarding trauma is still ongoing.

normally a reproduction or creation of copies, but repeated flashbacks never shed their singularity. The fright is new every time. Freud called events of this kind "mnemic traces" or "mnemic fragments".

Let us attempt a phenomenological interpretation of these events. The integrative function of time constitution is called temporalization. Briefly, temporalization begins with the immediate retention of an impression (the primal impression) in the present. This initial holding of a memory prevents it from being lost. Successive impressions are successively retained in a chain, and this chain is the transitive stage of the temporal perspective. Events along the chain can be recalled at will by the I and replayed or reproduced. Reproduced time phases along the time chain are joined together to constitute time as an integrated and explicit whole. It is only within this integrated time that experience can be established as a unity.

But when trauma occurs, the primal impression of an event is not retained and therefore does not join the chain. It does not become part of the flow of time. The "transitional synthesis" that joins successive phases into a single event also cannot take place. If "memory" is the retention of primal impressions within a succession of retentions, the primal impressions of a trauma fail to be retained and therefore do not become memories in the proper sense of the word. They are lost and cannot be freely recalled. But they have not been truly forgotten. They float around like residual ghosts in time, suddenly appearing as flashbacks. They have not been forgotten; they *cannot* be forgotten, because they have never been under the control of the ultimate defense mechanism of experience: the I. The function of the I to constitute time as an integrated unity was damaged at the onset.

In the preface to this paper, I remarked that March 11 is a tale told by an idiot because it was truly singular. However, its singularity does not stem from its being unprecedented. The decisive factor was the frightfulness of the catastrophe: the frightfulness that prevented the event from joining the flow of time. People could only gasp (Ah! Ah!) as the earth shook and the ocean swallowed the land. It was an event that stimulated the senses, but could not be properly verbalized. And yet, the images were repeated over and over. Words were repeated. The first words to be repeated were words with the minimum of universality: the proper name. The catastrophe goes in Japan by the name of 3.11—three numbers in a row that are very much like 9.11 just a decade before. The

minimal stuttering of fools that is the starting point for the reverbalization and recollection of a failed memory.

Benjamin mentioned the flashback as a technique of the cinema, and it is also interesting that he wrote of it in relation to the unconscious: "We encounter for the first time unconscious optics through it [the camera], the way we encounter unconscious impulses through psychoanalysis."¹⁶ The civilization (technology) that created films was linked in Benjamin's mind to the trauma spoken of by psychoanalysis. As Martin Jay points out, Benjamin was probably a trauma victim himself.¹⁷ Benjamin, however, refused to find consolation or healing in the trappings of modern civilization, since, after all, it was civilization that had brought on the trauma in the first place.

Benjamin was a gifted critic who could step outside civilization in his mind in order to analyze it. It was the distance he placed between himself and it that gave him the power to indirectly verbalize his own trauma¹⁸. For the phenomenologist, however, whose point of reference is the way things "appear," the verbalization of trauma is much more difficult. This is because trauma fails to "appear," either through memory or through reflection.

4. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRAUMA

Is a phenomenology of trauma impossible then? Are there no phenomenologists who have personally dealt with trauma? Levinas seems to be one¹⁹. Levinas is known for his emphasis of the concept of "diachrony," which points to a disjunction along the chain of temporal retentions. There is something hidden that ruptures the smooth flow of time. I think this concept is best understood when considered in relation to trauma.

It is first of all retention that prepares the way for the smooth integration of time. Retentions are the basic building blocks, linked chain-like to form the uni-

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Martin Jay, "Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the refusal to mourn", in Jay Winter / Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁸ It is not possible to step entirely out of civilization, so Benjamin's distancing must be seen as relative. Freud distanced himself from trauma by observing it through a patient, which is why he could talk about it.

¹⁹ And possibly Derrida.

ty of time. Retention, however, cannot retain forever. Beyond its range, Levinas sees memory and historiography at work: "We arrive at memory, which retrieves in images what retention cannot keep, and historiography, which reconstructs that of which the image has been lost. To speak of consciousness is to speak of time"²⁰.

This argument goes beyond Husserl and is reminiscent of Hegelian phenomenology, I think. What is beyond retention is retrieved by memory, and what is beyond memory is retrieved by historiography. History in this case is primarily a personal history, but it is also linked to our common history, and if we consider the French usage of the word *histoire*, it is also linked to "story-telling". The second part of the word, *graphy*, also takes us back to "writing".

Historiography is able to recover the continuity of ruptured experience. The power of recorded language and of verbalization is very great. Freud writes of curing patients through the verbalization of traumatic events, where they do not so much verbalize what they recall, as recall by verbalizing. Writing or speaking a story can smooth out the wrinkles in time, soothe the residual ghosts of trauma, and place the traumatic event back into the river of time. It creates the necessary distance for healing. This is the fourth power of language. Historiography can take a truly singular traumatic event and make it retrievable and reproducible, and change the incoherence into an experience. Civilization has a similar ability to heal wounds through medicine, mourning rites, religion, etc. And if trauma is linked to the death drive, the reproductive power of civilization can also suppress that drive. Reproduction functions as a suppression of death.

Yet Levinas, like Benjamin, did not try to conceal or heal trauma, but rather to shoulder it and go on with life. Levinas found in trauma, paradoxically, the possibility of morality. Holding on to it, he verbalized—or rather, reverbalized it.

In Japan, too, during and after the traumatic events of March 11, people became very altruistic and acted "for others." They saw the faces of disaster victims and felt themselves accused, felt the need to respond. They became subjects (subjected to the victims' faces) who gave priority to others over themselves and actively acted for them. This change, it seems to me, was trig-

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà d'essence*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, p. 41.

gered because the subject as a unified and integrated self, safe within the confines of a closed system, was deprived of its earlier defenses. March 11 was, in a sense, an event in which the truth of Levinas' argument suddenly became explicit. This truth—a truth rather than a morality, a fact rather than a command—is a weighty one.

But I ask again: what was it that appeared to us on March 11? Nature, which is sometimes in harmony with and sometimes in conflict with civilization, suddenly appeared to us in an extremely hostile form. Nuclear events followed and complicated the matter, since the nuclear power plants were products of civilization rather than of nature. The strength of civilization normally lies in its ability to excavate and bring into appearance hidden resources such as coal and oil and uranium, to draw out the "useful" aspects of nature and to suppress other not so favorable aspects with physical devices like dams and levees, and sometimes with sophisticated strategies like antibiotics and vaccinations. Civilization/technology is our way of making nature appear in some cases and suppressing it in others, as a means of defending ourselves from traumas. In many cases, it succeeds.

March 11, 2011 was a crisis not only because our most civilized defenses from trauma failed us, but even more because civilization itself (as technology) caused the greatest trauma of all. March 11 may have shown us one way to morality, but leaves us nevertheless with a civilization that traumatizes as well as it defends.

CONCLUSION

Benjamin cited film art as a primary example of technical reproducibility. Today, images are reproduced en masse, at a rate and speed unimaginable in Benjamin's day. During and after the events of March 11, which were truly singular for those who underwent them, images of the events are reproduced, repeatedly. They were recorded, edited, broadcast, copied, then recorded, edited and broadcast again, over and over.

Reproductions of this kind can result in long-term exposure to trauma, and perhaps trigger symptoms of a posttraumatic disorder. On the other hand, they may also weaken and dilute the frightfulness of a singular event. More specifi-

cally, by juxtaposing images of the catastrophe with those of “similar” catastrophes like the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 or the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004, they show us that it was not really so unprecedented or unique. Secondly, by presenting us with new events like an official declaration that the nuclear reactors have been “contained” and showing us images of the reconstruction underway, they tell us that the catastrophe was only a temporary state of affairs. Thirdly, by showing us images in chronological order, they encourage us to make a “story” out of the chaos. In this way, reproduced and repeated images play a role in smoothing out the ruptures in time. As such, they have an important function in modern civilization. Writing was once the most important and powerful means of reproduction, but that role seems to have been taken over by visual images. This means that we are also in more danger than before of being deceived by images and their appearance.

Is it possible to “embrace” trauma –to refrain from veiling it under reproduced and reproductive narratives? If embracing it means to follow the Jewish admonition *zakhor* (remember), this is a near impossibility for the “I,” since an I damaged by trauma loses its power to remember.

Apparently, we must accept the reproductions of civilization as a means of dealing with the trauma we have encountered. At the same time, we must be wary of what civilization conceals from us, including its tendency to generate new traumas. Benjamin warned that modern civilization has the power to shock. That power has greatly increased over the last century.

Let me end this fool’s tale with the words of another fool who lived in Japan eight hundred years ago. He was also witness to a series of calamities, including a massive earthquake and tsunami, and responded by writing an essay-poem that is still taught in schools today:

The flowing river never stops and yet the water never stays the same.
Foam floats upon the pools, scattering, re-forming, never lingering long. So it is with
man and all his dwelling places here on earth.²¹
Earthquakes and tsunamis have been part of Japanese history for a long time.

Then, as now, people were shocked, devastated, driven to tell stories and to philosophize. The poet, Kamo-no-Chomei, meant to warn his readers about the powerlessness of humanity against nature. Today, he would have to add

²¹ Kamo-no-Chomei, *Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World*, Berkeley, Stone Bridge Press, 1996. Trans. Yasuhiko Moriguchi / David Jenkins. The original was composed in 1212.

another warning against the destructiveness of civilization. Now, perhaps more than then, it is necessary to rethink our connections to both nature and civilization.