

The Storyteller: Observations on Murtada Bulbul's "Swineherders"

In 1936, the heyday of high modernism, Walter Benjamin chose to write in praise of the figure of the epic storyteller. In Benjamin's view, the storyteller possessed the rare ability to take experience—whether his own or that reported by others—and make it the experience of those who were listening. Benjamin claimed that the art of storytelling had been slowly disappearing, its decline paralleling the rise of the modern novel. This is a Marxist argument: epic forms, whose rhythms chart change that take place over thousands of years, have slowly given way to the *Bildungsroman*, in which social processes are timed to the lifespan and development of the individual. Some of Benjamin's ideas remain startlingly contemporary despite having been formulated almost a century ago: "Every morning brings us news from across the globe," he writes, "yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because nowadays no event comes to us without already being shot through with explanations. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information."¹ Benjamin draws a strong distinction between forms of communication that aim to transmit information versus those that seek to pass on experience. In our own digital age, the ability to transmit information has expanded tenfold. And what of our capacity to share experience?

Murtada Bulbul's stunning photographs depicting Bangladeshi swine herders and their four-footed charges offer evidence that storytelling is making a comeback. These images are not already "shot through with explanation." They do not aim to convey information in the manner of a news report. Rather, these photographs seek to articulate the experience of this ancient vocation. Spectators are invited to look over the shoulder of fifty-six-year-old Nirmal Chandra Das as he himself watches over the herd; we sit with him as he tries to steal a peaceful moment during his breakfast; we sense his exhaustion as he takes off his *lungi* after a long shift. Written into these simple physical gestures are generations of his people performing this labor. These photographs testify to the palpable leveling of the human body that is the ultimate product of the caste system. This does not stop us from identifying with the two young brothers, Lakshman and Shukan Chandra Das, as they boast and dream about building their own herd one winter night. Nor does it stop us from sharing in the exquisite pleasure of taking a bath in the river at the end of the day, or feeling the pangs of longing for the company of women in this fiercely segregated world. Perhaps even more remarkably, the spectator can glean a sense of what it is to spend a life among pigs: the creatures' peculiar stiff, short canter, their thick-necked bobbing as they forage for food, the way they spill over one another as they travel in a herd.

Through these photographs, spectators can come to know something of what it is to live life as a Dalit.

Does such an aesthetic encounter have any significance for social change? As William Wilberforce discovered long ago in his campaign to end slavery, human rights culture is propelled less by the conveyance of information—facts and statistics—than through the art of storytelling. By many accounts, Wilberforce was a remarkable orator who could make his listeners squirm in their seats. He was able to convey the nature of slavery, transferring something of its wretchedness to those who heard him speak. Scholars have reproduced their own version of this insight in recent years. At least since Richard Rorty's 1993 Oxford Amnesty Lecture, there has been a consensus that it is not reason and rationality that drive human rights culture, but something more akin to a sensibility, or what used to be called "moral sense."²

There are many scholars who are rightly suspicious of the manipulation of emotion as the grounds for political change. Rorty himself displays discomfort with his own "sentimentalist thesis," and Thomas Laqueur has further troubled the relationship between "sad and sentimental narratives" and the political imperatives of human rights.³ But despite reservations, many of these scholars still hold to the notion that narratives of suffering can constitute a valuable claim to attend to the other's plight, a demand to recognize that the other's experience is a matter of concern for the larger community of humanity. This is the storyteller's primary role: to offer an account of the other's fate for the understanding of the wider world, providing a hearth around which the household of humanity can glean some wisdom and warmth. In this respect, Bulbul's photographs are neither overly emotional nor dispassionate. They are not designed to wound the spectator or to ask her to immediately "do something" (namely, to intervene in the name of humanitarianism). Rather, these pictures are rooted in the deep rhythms of their subject, designed to transmit experience from one generation to the next. In his textual notes Bulbul recalls the swineherds' visits to his village when he was a child, the way they arrived once or twice a year to build their makeshift huts and graze their herds, and how their leaving invariably created a sense of emptiness in the young boy. It was later that he learned they were "untouchable." As Benjamin notes, "storytellers tend to begin their story with the presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow." These traces are what establish the possibility of communicating the experience to others.

I cast Murtada Bulbul's work as that of a storyteller in order to make two points. First, while several scholars have noted the importance of narrative for the very legibility of human rights, Bulbul's photographs (and of course not only Bulbul's) speak to the importance of visual cultural forms for this legibility.⁴ It may seem strange to characterize a photographer as a storyteller, but photography, like narrative, cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. As Ariella Azoulay has vividly suggested, we must learn to stop looking at photographs and to start watching them.⁵ Watching an image requires something more than the spectator simply identifying what is shown. It returns a dimension of time to the aesthetic encounter, expanding the photographic situation not only to political and ethical registers of meaning but also to the expanses of the imaginary. In Azoulay's terms, photography can generate a "civil contract"

between the various participants in the photographic situation, engendering a community that is both virtual and actual. What is at stake here is the politics of aesthetics: the way the spectator can become a “world spectator,” to use Hannah Arendt’s evocative term, who has a starring role in the political arena through her practices of looking, judging, and thinking. Seen through this lens, human rights are about much more than the specific events and actions that take place on the world stage. These events and actions must also take shape in the minds of distant spectators. In this respect, the photographer, like the storyteller, plays a crucial role by providing the very frames through which the political community of humanity is cast.⁶

My second point is more speculative. In his 1936 essay, Benjamin makes note of the kinship between the storyteller and the creaturely world. Through the storyteller, he writes, listeners often meet the “righteous man” who advocates on behalf of all creatures. Setting aside the question of righteousness for the moment, the presence of nonhuman creatures in Bulbul’s photographs must be acknowledged. Indeed, one could say this series is almost as much about the swine as about the swineherders. The first image is unassumingly captioned “Pigs crossing a marshy land in Gazipur, Bangladesh,” but the depiction is so breathtakingly monumental it might just as well have been called “The Deluge.” Bulbul is a photographer who appears to be as much at home picturing the lives of animals as he is the world of men. To press the point further, one could say that what is depicted here is a dimension of existence which appears only as a caesura in the sociopolitical terrain. Hannah Arendt famously called this condition “bare life,” but we might just as well call it “creaturely life,” for the proximity of the nonhuman animal is indeed significant.⁷ Bulbul helps us see that to be Dalit—a term that has been deemed “unconstitutional” in India—has traditionally meant not simply living as a social outcast but in fact living at the very eclipse of human existence itself. In the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, these are “husks of men that fate has spewed out” (an awful formulation that Primo Levi later resuscitated in his discussion of the *Musselmänner* in the Nazi death camps).⁸ What Bulbul’s photographs bear witness to is a threshold beyond which people can actually cease to belong to the human community, even as they are simultaneously needed, used, and exploited—as if the very effort to distinguish man as a “political animal” necessarily relegates other men to the creaturely life. Perhaps this is what Plautus meant by his aphorism *Homo homini lupus est*: “man is a wolf to man.”

Benjamin suggests that the storyteller can find righteousness in this pale: his gift is counsel; he is the one who can let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. In this way, we look forward to hearing more from Murtada Bulbul.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 147–48.

2. Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty International Lectures*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 111–34.

3. Thomas W. Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of 'Humanity,'" in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 31–57.

4. Apart from the scholars named above, Joseph Slaughter has also argued that there is a direct parallel between the conceptual vocabulary, deep grammar, and humanist social vision of human rights law and the *Bildungsroman*. Both share a vision, in the words of the Universal Declaration, that "human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want." See Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

5. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14.

6. There is a large and growing body of literature that attempts to address the visual dimension of human rights, one strand of which deals with the so-called spectacle of suffering. Some of this literature is taken up in Wendy S. Hesford's and Amy Shuman's excellent essay from a past issue of this journal, "Human Rights Contexts: Greg Constantine's 'Nowhere People'" *Humanity* 2, no. 2 (2011): 315–26. My phrasing also consciously references Judith Butler's discussion of "frames" in her *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009). While the focus on questions of representability is indeed significant, what has perhaps remained underdiscussed in this literature is the complexity of the spectator's role, something Jacques Rancière takes up in *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

7. For more on this intersection, see Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

8. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1990), 40. Giorgio Agamben *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 62. Compare Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 216–17, where these connections are also made.