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Visual Phenomenology: Encountering the Sublime Through Images (Phenomenology of Practice)

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*I'm sitting in a cozy chair tucked in a corner of my favorite coffee shop. I open my book, *Visual Phenomenology*, in hopes of commencing the first stages of a budding research project—to immerse myself in a new methodology. As I do, I smell the roasting of coffee beans, and I hear the dull chatter of surrounding conversations. Suddenly, I'm pulled into the text, and I can't seem to bring myself to close the volume. The surrounding sights and sounds are simultaneously amplified and dulled with the turn of each page. The experience is strange yet intriguing. I both need and want to learn more about the phenomenon of the sublime. As I attempt to comprehend Goble's text, I search for the sublime within my own world, through both past and present experiences.*

In *Visual Phenomenology: Encountering the Sublime Through Images*, Erika Goble presents her exploration of the sublime through a series of personal vignettes that describe individuals' experiences encountering the sublime, similar to my own included above. Through these retellings, she attempts to answer the question of "What is the lived experience of encountering an image that evokes the sublime?" (p. 14). Goble never quite defines the term sublime but provides, "With so many different coexisting mutations, to describe something as sublime today necessitates that the speaker define which 'sublime' he or she means" (p. 4). The experiences of the sublime are presented in first-person, and, as a reader, you're immediately captivated by these stories that are so eloquently written with exquisite attention to detail. You are able to experience the sublime alongside the participant. You can easily imagine yourself as Arina (Chapter 2), who, while standing in the line at the supermarket, is overcome by an extraordinary image on a mundane magazine cover that most would pass without a glance. You can embody Emma (Chapter 3) who sees both beauty and monstrosity in the mural skillfully painted by Brunelleschi that adorns

the dome of the church of Santa Maria del Fiore. In this way, Goble compellingly captures the mysterious duality of the phenomenon of experiencing the sublime.

Each chapter features two specific contrasting elements of the sublime, reinforcing the "experiential paradoxes" that are an integral component of the phenomenon Goble dissects (Goble, 2017, p. 17). These contradictions, including awe and terror, exquisiteness and monstrosity, delight and horror, clarity and mystery, and existence and inexistence, are inherently thought to never occupy the same space. Yet, within sublime encounters with visual imagery, individuals claim to experience an oscillation that curiously combines two opposing characteristics. Goble's text features tales that contain these paradoxes and additionally includes a review of the literature to reinforce the existing beliefs surrounding the concept of the sublime. Through this integration of personal accounts and the addition of previous research, the research presents a physical representation of the dual nature of the sublime itself.

Using these various forms of evidence, Goble asserts that the sublime is more than a mere concept to be theorized; it is a "concrete, given experience" (2017, p. 14). Following the work of Max van Manen, Goble situates this look into the sublime as a phenomenological study. Through this investigation, she seeks to "question the way we experience the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Specifically, encounters with the sublime are used to explain the complex ways individuals interact with images. Using this conceptual framework as a guide, Goble then implements the method of phenomenology of practice. This particular methodology promotes the act of "stepping outside of theory in order to see what aspect of a phenomenon theories cover over or negate" (pp. 14-15). Within *Visual Phenomenology*, description,

contained in the stunning narratives, is privileged over theory.

While the illustrative aspect of the research is highlighted, many key details are interestingly omitted. The ways in which Goble selected her participants and then analyzed their accounts of the sublime are not featured. Although she shares that, “The people who told me their stories ranged from academics and artists to teenagers and the average person on the street,” (Goble, 2017, p. 15) no identifying details of the participants are featured, other than their travels and experiences through which they encountered the sublime. This lack of information causes one to question the variety featured in the sampling procedures. However, Goble insists that, “the phenomenon of sublimity does not seem bound to a particular group of people” (p. 15). This anonymity helps ensure the comprehension of the sublime experience by all readers, as there are no confirmed qualifiers.

The participants met with Goble and spoke of their encounters, and the transcriptions of their verbal accounts are featured within the text. Goble’s analysis of these rich descriptions directly follows the vignettes. She breaks apart each story into easily digestible segments and then inserts her own interpretations, grounded within the literature. With her exploration of each telling, Goble attempts to answer additional questions that accentuate and go beyond her primary research question and “explore the various dimensions of existence found in all phenomena” (p. 17). Deemed *the existentials* (van Manen, 2014) by phenomenologists, these types of questions featured in this piece relate to the context of the experience of the sublime and the components affected by the event. For example, Goble seeks to find a response to the query, “How do we experience our body when we encounter an image that evokes the sublime?” (p. 17).

Visual Phenomenology contains an interwoven collection of various accounts of the sublime and answers to these existential questions. However, the final two sections of the text break this pattern, ending with a culmination of the implications, importance, and pedagogical impacts of exploring and experiencing the sublime. Chapter 7, “Sublimity and the Image” includes a summarization of the varying forms the sublime can take. Additionally, the transformative qualities of a sublime experience are expounded upon. Chapter 8, “Pedagogy and the Sublime Image,” navigates the possibilities, both positive and problematic, of discussing the sublime with young people. Containing vignettes of childhood experiences with the sublime, the last chapter of the book shares how the sublime can be a tool for transcendence, guilt, and also vulnerability. These experiences can provide educational opportunities for growth and understanding. However, Goble cautions that each experience, as with the nature of sublime, may manifest differently within each student. Specifically, educators have the responsibility to handle students’ experiences with the sublime both “thoughtfully and with care” (p. 156). To do so, educators must be innately aware of students’ needs and expectations and how to respond to these often silent and subtle demands. These responses may include allowing students to simply “dwell in the moment” (p. 157) or facilitating a discussion between peers on the experience.

Within the concluding paragraph of the book, Goble contends, “our relationship with the images is complex, highly personal, non-uniform and can be deeply meaningful” (p. 160). Similarly, I found my experience with *Visual Phenomenology* to be “highly personal.” I felt deeply and thought intently about the way that I interact with the visual imagery I encounter daily. My opening vignette attempts to capture the unique experience I had while reading.

I believe that researchers in the field of phenomenology and other sectors of qualitative research will, too, find some distinctive connection within the text to their own experiences with images. Particularly, as an educator in the field of language and literacy education, I saw great potential for classroom practices within Goble's work, a facet reinforced by her closing chapter. Her work goes beyond traditional notions of visual literacy and enters into a realm of transformation

and awareness. As educators, we have the responsibility to help our students mediate these experiences and direct the meaning-making process with both consideration and knowledge. Becoming aware of the various incarnations of the sublime and the pedagogical possibilities are just the first steps.

References

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