

Death of Entertainment: The Meaning Behind A Collapsed Theater

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### **Introduction**

When the semester started, our professor told us in our lecture that we would be writing a paper for this course. What was relieving was that even though he had a list of images to base the paper on, our professor gave us the liberty to choose the image we preferred. In this paper, I will be discussing the image of the destroyed theater stage in the six perspectives that we have covered in this course. The perspectives are personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, and critical. Join me as we dive deep into how the image above is represented through these six perspectives.

### **Personal**

The image above you is the one that stuck out to me the most in our professor's selection. To simply describe it in words, it is a photo of the stage or screen area of a theater collapsed to reveal the damaged surrounding buildings from the angle of the seats. The first reason for it sticking out to me is quite simple for a personal reason, I love entertainment. Whether it's television, film, or live theatrical, I love entertainment and the aspects that bring it to life. One of the earliest aspects that brings it to life is the setting it has taken place for centuries which is the theater itself.

There's a lot that is driven towards me as I look into this image. For one, it brings me sadness as I see the center of entertainment destroyed. We discussed this in an earlier lecture for this class but the theater is supposed to bring a suspension of disbelief. A way for it's audiences to escape from their reality to the reality of the story in front of them. Seeing that part of the

screen destroyed breaks that suspension and has let the reality of this world seep into this entertainment safe space.

### **Historical**

The background of this image is quite tragic. As we know, the United States is vast and can sustain many different types of natural disasters. A type of big and destructive natural disaster that could occur in the central-eastern part of our nation is tornadoes. According to the National Weather Service, there was a tornado that emerged on December 10, 2021, in the Northeast region of Tennessee. The tornado then “...moved across western Kentucky, resulting in significant destruction to portions of the region,” (NWS, 2021). The theater that is in the centerpiece of the photo was in Mayfield, which is a city in Kentucky.

Mayfield was one of the regions that were heavily affected by the tornado. This historical theater in the city had faced many different conflicts before the arrival of the tornado. It wasn't just the structures that faced tragedy in the city but also the people. U.S. President Joseph R. Biden remarked after a briefing of the tornado that “...the human impact of this devastation is just—the depth of the losses are becoming more and more apparent,” (Biden, 2021, pg. 1). So while this theater faced the destruction of the tornado, it is only but one victim from it.

### **Technical**

When Mayfield was struck by the tornado, a man named Shawn Triplett traveled to his hometown shortly after the tornado to help as much recovery as he could (Skinner, 2021). Once he arrived at the scene, he couldn't help but take photos of the destroyed city (Skinner, 2021). He did so with just an iPhone and he mainly did it for his memory but eventually, he felt compelled

to share them on Reddit which is where the source of this photo is from (Skinner, 2021). Since the post was in December of 2021, the iPhone model used either the iPhone 13 or older.

Red is one color heavily used in the image. It is said in an academic book that “...red is capable of having two opposing characters, love and hate at the same time,” (Purbasari, 2021, pg. 65). The red in this image can indicate the love for entertainment that exists in this world. All of the red is on the seats of the theatre. The other prominent color in this image is yellow and that academic book describes yellow as a color of the sun and/or light. While the focus is tragic, the color yellow brings a bright, hopefulness to the image.

One other aspect that is used in this photograph is the depth of field. One academic article shared that the accepted approach in photography is to utilize the “limited depth of field of a lens to emphasize and frame focused objects while deemphasizing the rest of a scene” (Kim, J., Horstmeyer, Kim, I., Raskar, 2011, p. 24). People would have to spend a lot of money to get a lens for the depth of field to deemphasize the background. Shawn Triplett didn’t deemphasize the background but used a wide depth of field to show how large the theater room was and how far the damage of the tornado reached.

This photo has a very stagnant but powerful way of using composition. Everything around the screen area of the theater feels very symmetrical. The seats are centered and both of the corners in the room are visible. Once the screen area of the theater is viewed, the symmetry is all gone. While the composition of the camera is symmetrical, it becomes very chaotic in structure when the outside of the building is revealed. The uncentered building on the slight right breaks the composition of the setting. While it does break the symmetry, it does so in a way that makes the subject of the destruction feel more impactful.

### **Ethical**

The image that was chosen for this paper follows the ethical philosophy of Categorical Imperative. Categorical Imperative was a philosophy created by Immanuel Kant. The main basis of this ethical philosophy is to behave solely “in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law,” (Platz, 2016, pg. 370). What this means in simple terms is that right is right and it the best must be done in accordance with lawful intent. The image that was chosen for this paper represents this philosophy in both the image itself and the photographer.

As mentioned earlier, Shawn Triplett felt compelled to come back to his hometown and seek to help with the recovery for the city. The intent to help the relief in the city is already an example of categorical imperative. Shawn saw this situation and instead of finding an online donation-like service to help out with the city, he sought to help out in person himself. Take into account that nowhere in the law does it say that a citizen can’t help out with the recovery of a destroyed city or area with structures and surroundings that might not be the most safe.

When he got to the theater building, he took a photo of it at first for just his memory. The photo itself is an example of Categorical Imperative because it shows where the damage didn’t hit in the theater. The image shows that most of the damage is outside or near the stage area of the theater but not the audience seats. The builders sought to use categorical imperative to make sure that the audience members were safe if something were to damage the roof of that theater. If there was anybody that the builders went out of their way to protect, it was the audience.

A few days after taking it, Shawn Triplett posted the image with others he took that day onto Reddit where it went viral (Skinner, 2021). This is an example of categorical imperative

because Shawn did so in order to get more attention on the recovery from the tornado. It would be the right thing to do to share the photos of the damage to the city with those on the world wide web. Because of that, the toy drive that Shawn ran raised about \$80k which brought more relief than he could imagine.

### **Cultural**

There are symbols and subtle aspects in this image that can reach out to the viewer. For one, it seems to talk somewhat say a lot about entertainment. For the longest time in the previous century, it was considered academic to work in theater (Campbell, 2014). As an article describes it, “It was assumed that real theatre artists — playwrights, actors, directors, designers — worked in the theatre...” (Campbell, 2014, pg. 10). Theater artists would work very hard to bring a theater production into reality in order for audience members to be entertained. Entertainment is an outlet or path to experience escapism fully.

Escapism is when we are taken out of our reality and the reality of the world. A way to escape from our problems and enjoy the subject in front of us. This image symbolizes the breaking of escapism. You see through the audience’s point of view but instead of seeing a theater stage or theater-projected screen, you see the surrounding buildings completely in utter destruction. People and theater cultures consider the theater a safe place for story-telling. They see it as a sanctuary for their art. When that sanctuary gets destroyed or its veil is gone, reality sets in for everyone inside.

This image also says a lot about the safety of structures and natural disaster relief. Mayfield and surrounding cities were all built a long time ago. This shows that they did not have the strongest materials to use for the infrastructure. Even if they were strong, they were not

tornado-proof. That's not to say that this building was weak, but that there was no way for the city to be prepared for the tornado that hit. The image shows symbolistically in how our planet does not entirely protect certain things like buildings.

Even if these buildings are structurally sound, that does not make them entirely safe from the worst kind of disasters that could occur. It has been declared that the effects that natural disasters bring on the citizens and communities that experience them are rarely understood (Cassar, Healy, and Kessler, 2017). The city that the theater is in has faced many situations over the course of history but it had sustained everything until the tornado. This shows how the image brings into question how emergency-ready communities are. Whether Shawn Triplett intended for his picture to be interpreted this way or not, it's clear to see that this image says a lot about how communities should be prepared for intense emergencies.

### **Critical**

As I've done more research into the image, I am amazed by it in many different aspects. For one, it is incredible that a small device like an iPhone can capture such a professional-looking photo. Many photographers try to purchase expensive equipment in order to get photographs that look as good as the one for this paper. Nowadays, I would usually find symmetrical framing pretentious but I think Shawn found a way to make it interesting in this photo. Despite it not really using the rule of thirds, Shawn managed to make his photo impactful in framing and in subject focus.

The photo also shows the separation between the artist and those looking at the art. Shawn managed to capture this photo with just the idea that he wanted to capture tornado destruction. As I look at the photo, I think of how it can say a lot about escapism can distract us

from the problems that we chose to ignore. While that was not Shawn's intention, the photo brought a message about how people can take structures that represent enjoyment way too seriously. It's not a deconstruction of the entertainment medium but a reevaluation of what really matters in life.

### **Conclusion**

After writing this paper, I have to say that it has helped me appreciate artists who unintentionally create art. The image shows both the dangers of natural disasters as well as the dangers of taking certain areas of life like entertainment way too seriously. It did both of these things when all the artist wanted to do was take photos of his hometown after a tornado for posterity. As horrible as the context of the photo is, it is somewhat inspiring for those who seek to create lasting images/photos in their lifetime. It's a message that says that anyone could be a photographer.



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