

**Book review**

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**Pramod K. Nayar, *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture: States of Vulnerability*.**

(London: Rowman &amp; Littlefield, 2017), softcover, xv+165 pp.

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**Abstract:** Pramod K. Nayar's inventive 150-page examination of physical and psychological vulnerability of man under extreme circumstances—torture, terminal illness, environmental and geographical limits etc.—is a brilliant work best described as a thought-provoking, and surprisingly emotional, equivalent of an academic horror story. 'The Extreme in Contemporary Culture' leads the reader through film, literature, extreme sports, two major historical events—9/11 and Chernobyl—and the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, and, like a neat multi-flowered bouquet, interlinks these different topics in one (un)floral cone: the human body under duress.

**Keywords:** vulnerability; contemporary culture; the extreme

Pramod K. Nayar's inventive 150-page examination of physical and psychological vulnerability of man under extreme circumstances—torture, terminal illness, environmental and geographical limits etc.—is a brilliant work best described as a thought-provoking, and surprisingly emotional, equivalent of an academic horror story. *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture* leads the reader through film, literature, extreme sports, two major historical events—9/11 and Chernobyl—and the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, and, like a neat multi-flowered bouquet, interlinks these different topics in one (un)floral cone: the human body under duress.

With such an intense yet delicate topic as torture, be it in such film franchises as the *Saw* or *Hostel*, or in the case of real life i.e. The War on Terror, Nayar is thoughtful and capable of walking the fine line between Hollywood fetishisation and real world implications. When discussing the space in which torture occurs, be it the compact and claustrophobic cell, the wide-open warehouse or, most importantly, the body and the mind of the tortured, the author, through his expert use of language not only paints an (often) frightening image in the reader's mind, but also provides a researched and well crafted argument for the post-traumatic psychology of 'no longer feeling at home in the world.'<sup>1</sup>

A particularly intense and emotional section of the work deals with an all-too-familiar form of 'he extreme, cancer. Nayar challenges the typical philosophical trope of what it means to have a body by addressing what happens when the body uses itself against its owner. The reflection on human nature when faced with extreme circumstances as familiar to us as our own body is riveting and provides a glimpse into how little separates our conscience being from becoming mere flesh, moving the disease—and in turn the extreme—from 'out there' to 'in here.' He goes on to discuss the mediation and conversation that occurs between the physical and mental self by breaking it down into a three-stage process borrowed from Noël Carroll: onset, discovery, and confirmation. The section is truly something of a surreal experience, and provides an emotional core of an academic gaze at the state of vulnerability, which, at its essence can be applied to any other debilitating disease, such as Alzheimer or Lou Gehrig's disease.

<sup>1</sup> Pramod K. Nayar. *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture: States of Vulnerability*. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 14.

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The author's exploration of the role of time in the extreme is also quite insightful, especially when concerned with the extreme as a historical event. For example, when discussing time freeze in Chernobyl and Pripyat, Nayar plants in the reader's mind the timeframe of 48,000 years before the land can be made inhabitable again, and goes on to address the incomprehensible absurdity of that timeframe, making the reader reflect on time in the context of their own vulnerability to it. Similarly, when discussing time in the context of the extreme, he points out the split in 'clock time' and 'perceived time'; in other words, the actual length of time spent under torture versus the time that had passed in the mind of the one being tortured, a truly undeveloped phenomenon that deserves cultural exploration beyond a similar concept explored in Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder*.

Although excellent, the book is not perfect: it is only 150 pages of research and, as of this writing, goes for an excessive £80 (\$120) for a hardback or around £24 (\$38) for a paperback/digital copy on the publisher's website, which is frankly, too much. Furthermore, the author does not address the topic of mass shootings, school or otherwise, which to his credit he does point out in an endnote to chapter three as a topic he will not address. It is a missed opportunity to further expand on the theme of 'the extreme in the everyday,' especially when Nayar notes on page 104 of the paperback edition, that the ultimate victim of the extreme is the child. Hopefully, the topic will be addressed in further editions as, from a cultural perspective, there is much to explore on the subject matter, be it via the 2003 film *Elephant*, Joel Schumacher's 1993 *Falling Down* or the surfeit of novels: *Hate List*, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and many others.

In the end, Pramod K. Nayar's book is raw, insightful and should be required reading in all culture studies and political science, especially peace and conflict resolution, programs throughout. Thoroughly researched—and assembling a plethora of topics under one roof—*The Extreme in Contemporary Culture* is a tour de force concerning vulnerability: a timely topic for the age of technological dehumanization, rose-colored social media reflections of the self and violent hypernormalisation.