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The secret suffering of sexual abuse From private experience to collective memory

Abstract

By understanding pathos as suffering, this contribution explores the possibility for the intrinsically secret suffering of sexual abuse to be shared and communicated to foster healing and promote safer common spaces. Referring to Herman's reflections on trauma in dialogue with philosophical reflections on the social and political impact of shared emotions (Nussbaum; Lara), this article shows concrete cases of aesthetic practices that can give voice to the voiceless suffering of abuse.

Keywords

Sexual Abuse, Testimony, Collective Affect

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This article focuses on preliminary aspects of a topic that, despite its presence in the literature (Bennet 2005; Kitch, Gilpin 2024), is rarely addressed from a philosophical or aesthetic perspective. I am referring to the relation between art and creative practices and sexual abuse related trauma.

This contribution situates itself in a broader disciplinary context commonly called *Safeguarding* – one that reflects on the promotion of spaces, processes and relations that not only enable intervention when minors and adults at risk are abused, but which advance conditions that make abuse less likely to take place at all.

It is not possible to address here the complexity of this field and its encouraging developments in recent decades. What I prefer to make explicit is the specific focus from which this contribution departs, and which represents the starting point of a still running research. Starting from a reflection on *pathos*, to which this volume is dedicated, I propose to primarily understand this term in its *negative* sense: *Pathos* is here understood as an affection that causes suffering. Within the context of *Safeguarding*, the kind of suffering I will refer to is the one experienced by those who are sexually victimized and abused (minors, in particular). The principal element needing to be considered is that one of the specific characteristics of this kind of suffering is its “secrecy”. Sexual abuse is a “secret suffering”.

Allow me an explanatory digression. Abuse is “secret” at different levels. Abuse – especially, but not only, sexual abuse of minors – usually occurs within a relationship of trust, where the perpetrator exploits that trust, along with their role of responsibility towards the victim, in order to obtain sexual gratification, carrying out an affective and psychological manipulation of the same victim¹. The result of this manipulative relational process is that, in many cases, the abuse is “secret” even to the victims themselves. In cases of abuse against minors, in particular, children might not recognize the abuse as such. They experience something painful to which they cannot even give a name. They find themselves in the *impossibility* of naming it and, therefore, of speaking out (Alaggia 2004).

This secrecy is frequently fostered by the (cultural and institutional) context in which the abuse occurs. The lack of sexual education, taboos

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/tackling-sexual-exploitation-abuse-and-harassment/defining-sexual>, WHO, Prevent and protect (accessed 13 July 2026). What you need to know and do: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/ethics/sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-pamphlet-en.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2026).

regarding delicate topics like sexuality, considering the reputation of the family or institution as being more important than the rights of the victim – these are some of the elements that can contribute to the secrecy of abuse (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, Lateef 2019). This does not only inhibit the possibility for the victim to disclose, but it is also one of the reasons behind the phenomenon of “cover up” – a well-known example being that which occurred in, but was not limited to, the Catholic Church (Pinciotti, Orcutt 2021; Zollner 2022).

Another important element is the social factor, the willingness of the social context to accept and recognize the abuse as an evil done against the victim, for which only the perpetrator is judged guilty and held responsible. Sadly, this is not always the case. The most common social reaction in cases of abuse is so-called “victim blaming”: the tendency to consider the victim responsible for the abuse suffered. The phrase, “They asked for it”, is particularly common in cases of violence against women, but it is also pervasive across different contexts, including the abuse of minors.

All these elements contribute to marking this type of suffering with an intrinsic secrecy, a peculiar invisibility, making it difficult to communicate. Feminist literature has shown this ambivalence, pointing out the importance for the victims to give voice to their suffering, but also the risks hidden in this act to make this speech, in a Foucauldian way, a subject of dominance (Alcoff, Grey 2003), an act which reiterates the tendency of keeping this suffering under the control of the dominant discursiveness, continuing to hide it². Speaking out the suffered violence offers to the dominant discourse the possibility of silencing it by not accepting, recognizing it or by keeping it under control.

Clearly, this has huge implications in terms of intervention (if the abuse is not recognized, no one can intervene to stop it), and prevention (if the socio-cultural context is unaware that abuse can happen, is ignorant of its characteristics, and fails to recognize its tell-tale signs – or does not even accept the *hear* about that – then perpetrators have more space to act).

² It is worth mentioning that the impossibility of narrating the rape experience and, above all, that it can be recognized and accepted by the audience has been explored by feminist literature, which identifies in the patriarchal ideology rooted in society the framework that inhibits the recognition of the suffering, even by the juridical system. This is another interesting perspective that can contribute to deepening the present reflection, but that cannot be dealt with in more detail here, where the issue is considered from a more general perspective (MacKinnon 1989; Dworkin 1997).

This constant process of silencing the suffered violence at the level of what Foucault calls “discursiveness” cannot be deepened here. I will go back to this point at the end of this contribution. As Alcoff and Grey noted, however, the survivors’ speech about the abuse they have suffered is constantly silenced by the dominant discursiveness, which, at the same time, is also the condition for this speech to take place. Going beyond this paradox means for the authors to “create discursive spaces in which we can maximize its [of the survivors’ speech] disruptive effects” (Alcoff, Grey 2003: 287) – but for this to happen, “new discursive forms and spaces” are needed (287).

Numerous studies show how both intervention and prevention would benefit from an overcoming of this secrecy, requiring a social awareness that is able to create a sphere in which open discourse about abuse is promoted rather than inhibited (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, Lateef 2019).

In what follows, I would like to develop this discussion into a more philosophical (and aesthetic) reflection, one that can be summed up in the following questions: How can we make this *pathos*, that is so intrinsically secret and invisible, perceptible in a way that can have social impact in terms of justice and prevention? How can we create spaces for it to be authentically and socially *felt*?

1. An intriguing answer to the question mentioned above can be found in the work of a renowned American psychiatrist, Judith Herman, who has devoted much of her work and research to caring for the victims of trauma.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Herman considers the therapist as an authentic witness, someone who needs to be able to receive the full emotional content of the narrative provided by the patient. Following Breuer and Freud on this point, she writes: “A narrative that does not include traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete” (Herman 1992: 257). The therapist is “called upon to provide a context that is at once cognitive, emotional, and moral”, and has to share “the emotional burden of the trauma” (Herman 1992: 259). Witnessing becomes possible only if the trauma is not just recalled, but also transmitted in its entire emotional and physical pain. Being a witness means creating a space that allows this suffering to be shared.

But Herman goes further: “Testimony has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial” (Herman 1992: 263). Testimony can only have a therapeutic

effect when it encounters a social context capable of recognizing the trauma as such. It must then be capable of taking a moral, political, and juridical position with respect to it. “In the absence of a socially meaningful form of testimony, many traumatized people choose to keep their symptoms” (Herman 1992: 267).

Herman names categories already partially addressed in the broad inquiry regarding the issue of testimony in the context of the Holocaust (there are evident points of contact between these two topics, but they are outside the scope of this article). These categories can be summed up as follows:

1. Trauma care requires the presence of a witness;
2. The witness is the one who can share the narrative of the suffering not only at cognitive, but also at emotional and sensorial levels;
3. Trauma care requires testimony in order to achieve socially meaningful forms.

On this last point, in *Truth and Repair* (2023), Herman refers to the philosopher Bernard Williams, who writes that the sharing of pain “serves to bind people together in a community of feeling” (Herman 2023: 54). The shared feeling therefore achieves a social and, in some respect, political value.

We are dealing here with a suffering, that, despite its intrinsic secrecy, can be healed only when shared in its essential dimension of *pathos*, both emotionally and physically. This sharing promotes and requires a community as a space for healing and for increasing social awareness.

The link between the sharing of emotions and the creation of a just community has been further explored by Martha Nussbaum, who speaks of the “intelligence of emotions” both in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* and in *The Fragility of Goodness*.

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum deepens the idea of the emotion of compassion in a chapter where she invokes the possibility of co-suffering (*cum-patire*) with another person – in our case, the abuse victim. According to Nussbaum, emotions always include a cognitive and ethical content, because they are grounded in judgments. According to her, compassion is grounded in the following judgments:

Compassion has three cognitive elements: the judgment of *size* (a serious bad event has befallen someone); the judgment of *nondesert* (this person did not bring the suffering on themselves); and the *eudaimonistic* judgment (this person,

or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted). (Nussbaum 2001: 321)

According to Nussbaum, another person's suffering can move my *co-suffering* only if these judgments are present.

However, as we have seen, in the case of abuse, these judgments are precisely what are missing. In the first place, as described above, the manipulative relational dynamic of abuse has the effect of challenging the possibility of those judgments to take place; secondly, often those judgments are exactly what are missing in the social community in which the abuse occurs.

1. Judgment of size: omission and the cover-up of abuse have often occurred in different social and institutional contexts because of a failure to recognize the seriousness of the acts. This is still the case in many contexts, especially those where inappropriate conduct and even sexual exploitation are normalized;
2. Judgment of nondesert: as mentioned above, social discourse tends to consider the victim, if not culpable, at least co-responsible for the abuse suffered;
3. *Eudaimonistic* judgment: this is the most complex, as it assumes that a social entity recognizes the safety and health of its members as being meaningful to the safety and health of the society as a whole and, consequently, that a wound inflicted on an individual also affects the entire society.

In the case of the secret suffering of abuse, it appears the community to which the victim belongs lacks the ability to perceive and understand that suffering as such. It seems this suffering *cannot be shared*. But unless it is shared, it cannot be healed.

2. Philosophically speaking, we find ourselves in an interesting situation: the cognitive understanding needed for the abuse suffering to be shared, needs to find its own foundation. We need something to help us understand the seriousness of the pain experienced, the fact that the victim never deserved to be abused, and that such suffering concerns us all as a whole. This is an example of that kind of judgement without a conceptual

foundation and that needs something, which Kant refers to as “reflective judgment”.

In *Narrating evil: A post-metaphysical theory of reflective judgment*, Maria Pia Lara explores the importance of evil being considered through a reflective mode of judgment. Starting from Arendt’s understanding of Kant’s reflective judgment as a political one, Lara shows that for evil to be narrated, a contingent manifestation of it needs to be given in a certain socio-political context. The narration gains the Ricoeurian meaning of configuration and assumes an aesthetic connotation. Lara writes:

Reflective judgment consists of two different moments: The first happens when the spectator or reader issues a judgment about what is happening in the representation, where she considers the idea of a spectator who sees action with an impartial detachment. The second moment occurs when spectators engage in understanding action, to pursue new paths to transform themselves. Then the viewer becomes an actor. In deliberating with others, then, spectators see themselves as persons whose responsibility toward their community needs to activate their collective judgment in order to create a sense of community. Communicability using this process of deliberation in the public realm brings political understanding [...]. The link we should establish here is with Kant’s ideas about judgment as an aesthetic dimension that entails community practices as products of shared experiences. (Lara 2007: 52-4)

In other words, for the evil – in our case, the secret suffering of abuse victims – to be shared and understood by a community, it has to be exhibited (narrated, configured) in a way that can ground and stimulate our capacity for reflective judgment. Following Arendt’s interpretation of Kant (Arendt 1982), such a judgment is grounded on a personal feeling that, nevertheless, we assume to be communicable with those with whom we share a common social space. If we can feel addressed by this *pathos*, this suffering, if we can understand, recognize and, finally, name it, this is because we can assume that the other members of the social space we live in experience the same. We are all addressed by it. This suffering *concerns* us as a community. It awakens our common sense of responsibility.

Lara speaks about feelings which immediately turn into actions: “the viewer becomes an actor”. Concrete examples will be given, that show the link between testimony and action. Before arriving at those concrete cases, we need to take another theoretical step.

The link between this “shared feeling” and compassion, as it is addressed by Nussbaum, belongs to a philosophical tradition that goes back to Aristotle:

Tragedy is a representation [*mimesis*] of an action of a superior kind – grand, and complete in itself [...] performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear [*eleos* and *phobos*], the purification [*catharsis*] of such emotions. (Aristoteles 2013: 23)

We will return to this definition later. What is worth highlighting now, is that Nussbaum provides a convincing argument for interpreting *catharsis* as “clarification”, rather than “purification”. It allows us to better understand the passions mentioned in the same quotation, namely pity and fear. Nussbaum prefers translating *eleos* as “compassion”, as it more effectively communicates the idea of the sharing process that is put in place here. This also better conveys the ethical consequences of the same: the emotional-cognitive clarification that happens, does not only stay at a theoretical level. It allows the viewer to recognize those emotions as something that can happen to themselves. It is no coincidence that such a process is provoked by the “representation of an action”. What happens does not only concern a sort of emotional reaction, but involves a personal commitment. Emotions, understanding and action appear tightly interconnected. There is a way of acting, a gesture, so to speak, that when represented, helps me understand through emotions something I could not see otherwise.

Here we return to Lara’s interpretation of Kant. Referring to evil and our ability to comprehend it, she seems to rethink what Nussbaum calls “intelligence of emotions” by inverting the paradigm: there is no cognitive foundation of emotions, but an emotional foundation of cognitions. In other words, there’s a reality – such as the secret suffering, to which we are referring – for which our conceptual system is unprepared. We cannot grasp it unless something exhibits it in a way that moves our emotions, making us capable of seeing, recognizing and understanding something we could not otherwise comprehend. According to Kant’s Third Critique, this process is exemplified in the fine arts, the works of genius, which are capable of exhibiting aesthetic ideas – namely, intuitions (of the imagination) “for which a concept can never be found adequate” (Kant 1790: 342). Lara explicitly refers this to the representation of actions: “The disclosiveness of the descriptions of actions relate to the aesthetic realm because they are well constructed *expressions* that make us see things in a way that we were not capable of seeing before” (Lara 2007: 42).

Despite the complexity of this argument, according to what has been said, it seems possible to conclude that the promotion of narrative and/or

artistic – in short, aesthetic – configurations can render the evil visible and, in this way, comprehensible.

In our case, though, we are dealing with an evil that we have defined as an intrinsically secret suffering, which seems to lack the possibility of being exhibited in a way that would allow the community to *reflect* on it and draw aware judgments about it – which would be the condition for this form of evil to be narrated, shared, and, in this way, healed. We are looking for something that could make the community *co-suffer* with the victim (the compassion referred to above) in order to recognize the size of their experience, that they are not responsible for it, and that this pain concerns the community to which the victim belongs (remember Nussbaum's judgments). But again, we are speaking of a suffering that appears to lack any possibility of being exhibited.

If the traumatic quality of the suffering provoked by abuse is linked to a secrecy that makes it impossible for it to be received by the collective sensibility, does it not cease to be perceived as suffering the moment it is communicated? By diluting the pain in this way, do we not fail in promoting justice? On the other hand, if the communicability of the traumatic experience can only be achieved by transmitting all its painfulness, do we not risk retraumatizing rather than fostering healing spaces? Do we need to “traumatize” the community to make it aware (Bennett 2000)?

These are open questions to which no definitive answers can be given here. A possible way to address them can nevertheless be proposed.

3. As we have seen, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, gives a possible way out from the mentioned paradoxes. Indeed, the specific power of the tragic *mimesis* is the capacity to convey (painful) emotions in a way that cause them to be experienced by the viewers, keeping them bearable. Jill Bennett, who works on the connections between images, arts, and trauma, writes in this regard:

We need to consider affect not simply as a product of originary trauma or of identificatory relationships but as something that can manifest in and around an image, establishing connections between bodies. [...] It addresses processes of interconnection in the context of community violence, a context in which the sharing and remembering of trauma may itself require specific forms of mediation. (Bennett 2002: 342)

We are looking for an “affect”, therefore, that is not merely the transmission of the originary trauma (as this would be re-acting the abuse), but

which is capable of connecting people belonging to a certain community, so that the process of sharing the pain makes it visible.

There must be a way to transform the secret suffering from a private experience to a collective memory. Therefore, we can anticipate here that a way out of the Foucauldian paradox between the possibility for victims to speak out and the risk of submitting this speech to dominant discursiveness lies in the possibility of involving in this act a sort of communitarian mimesis.

Consequently, in the light of some existing works, and of the theoretical reflections produced on these topics, the idea proposed here is that sharing a secret suffering is only possible when the recipients are proactively involved in the process, following the Aristotelian insight that the *catharsis* (clarification, following Nussbaum) of the compassion can occur as “mimesis of actions”. There must be a *way of acting* that can be found in communities in which even the intrinsic secrecy of the abuse can be communicated and *felt*.

It is not accidental that many memorials dedicated to the victims of various forms of violence, those existing as well as those in planning³, foresee the physical and interactive participation of the public. A paradigmatic case is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin: a space that can be crossed, almost open to *dwelling*, borrowing a meaningful term of contemporary philosophical reflection⁴.

But there are even more interesting experiments and events that, not coincidentally, have been developed as forms of memorials in response to sexual abuse. Remarkably, these examples did not simply arise to be experienced through active participation: they were born *as* collective practices. In the following paragraph two meaningful cases will be presented.

4. The first case I refer to is the *Monument Quilt*. Created in Baltimore, USA, it gathers over 3000 stories of survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence, as well as of child abuse, written or painted on red fabrics and displayed in public spaces. It was exhibited in 33 cities in the United

³ National Memorial for Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse: <https://www.dss.gov.au/national-memorial-victims-and-survivors-institutional-child-sexual-abuse> (accessed 13 July 2026).

⁴ <https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/> (accessed 13 July 2026).

States and Mexico between 2013 and 2019. The last exhibition was in Washington DC, where the quilts were displayed along the National Mall. They have since been distributed to various permanent collections and can be viewed on the dedicated website⁵.

The quilts were produced by both survivors and people close to them, an interaction that not only produced works in the classical sense of the term, but set in motion a process of testimony which has re-shaped common spaces in different cities, at the heart of social and community life, giving to those spaces new meaning, promoting sharing and healing.

A “monument” that does not stay fixed and granite-solid, like a warning sign the public is free to ignore. It enters into the life of communities through the proactive gestures of those who participate in it. People do not only see it, they can walk on it, cross over the space reframed by it, becoming part of it. The suffering of the victims that gains a voice through the process starts to concern people. It is no longer a secret suffering. It is something that affects me as well. It has to do with me. I can (physically) take a position on it.

More than a memorial, the second case can be described as a *movement*. It was one of the consequences of the inquiry carried out by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-17) that investigated child abuse cases in institutional contexts in Australia. One of its reports revealed the horrific cases of child abuse and the related systematic cover-up by Catholic Church institutions and authorities in Ballarat. A systemic silencing of a significant number of victims and their families, as well as people who reported abuse cases, emerged. Once more, the suffering was condemned to stay secret.

The response was that, suddenly, colored ribbons appeared, tied to the gates of St. Patrick’s College in Ballarat, one of the Catholic schools involved in the scandal. Despite initial attempts by the institutions involved to remove the ribbons, the action rapidly spread beyond Australia and became global. Under the motto “No More Silence”, the “LOUD Fence” movement, the gesture of tying colored ribbons to the gates and fences of Catholic schools, churches and institutions, became a universal symbol promoting awareness, active participation, and calling for change. Common spaces, linked to the silenced memory of an uncommunicable pain, were re-shaped by the people. They gained new meaning, becoming both a visible sign of the horrors perpetrated, and proactive efforts towards creating healed, safer spaces and relationships.

⁵ <https://themonumentquilt.org/archiving-the-monument-quilt/> (accessed 13 July 2026).

Two elements are significant here: “the spatial dimensions of ‘LOUD Fence’ mean that the practice cannot be understood solely as commemorative” (McDonald 2023: 222). The aesthetic experience of LOUD Fence is not a static monument in simple remembrance of something belonging to the past, it re-enacts the practical action of standing up against it through an interaction that transforms secrecy into dialogue. A dialogue which involves everyone.

The gesture of re-tying the ribbons every time they were removed, attributes a ritual dimension to the action, and this goes far beyond the simple act of remembering. It constructs “a community of memory” (Alison 2018: 79): The pain suffered by the victims is not a secret experience anymore. It involves the whole community. It is an experience that can finally be shared, and against which the whole community can stand at last.

Acting creates a space for a common exhibition, where the secret suffering is perceptible, recognized, fought against. The community constitutes itself around the recognition of a suffering that would otherwise remain secret. This gesture not only creates a new physical, common space. It promotes a political, social and moral awareness that can no longer be ignored.

The paradox of a suffering that cannot be shared can be addressed by moving beyond a subjectivist paradigm, in which the responsibility for communicating a certain pathos is placed on the victims who want or try to communicate their pain. For a certain enunciation to be said in a way that it can witness such intrinsically secret suffering, the foundation has to be found that can ground the possibility for common judgments to be spoken out and possibly understood by all people sharing the space of the same communication. As we have seen, such a foundation is not cognitive but intrinsically aesthetic, i.e., it rests on the exhibition of something that opens a space for such pain to become *visible* and *perceptible* as such. This, following the Kantian understanding of reflective judgment, can only be achieved when and where a common sense and a common feeling are not only assumed but also made possible. It is a gesture that, therefore, by its very nature, requires a common act, a shared *mimesis*, where “new discourse forms and spaces” are made possible (Alcoff, Grey 2003: 287). By acting out a new aesthetic realm, the space is provided for a common and shared understanding of the traumatic suffering of abuse, despite its secrecy, to acquire a (ethical and political) decisive visibility.

This is what finally enables the community to share the judgments described by Nussbaum, and with which this contribution began:

1. The suffering experienced by the victim of abuse is serious and must be taken seriously;
2. The victim is not to be held culpable for the abuse suffered;
3. This person is significant to the community and for its aims, aims that promote the common good.

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