

On Images, Stories, and the Need to Hear More

Written by Swati Parashar

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SWATI PARASHAR, OCT 8 2015

We are living through difficult times when violence, both discursive and physical, is more the norm than exception. There is a scramble to react and theorise but utterances in the social media drown thoughtful reflections and debates. In this article, which is partly in response to Annick Wibben's and Megan MacKenzie's blog posts on the Duck of Minerva and a host of other reactions, updates and discussions on social media, I would like to make two points. Firstly, although visual images have become critical in invoking moral conscience and forging consensus around global issues (such as the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis), only certain kinds of images that mitigate difference and 'otherness' seem to be imbued with that affective appeal in Western contexts. Secondly, the selective appeal of images must make us pause and reflect at this critical juncture. It is an ethical, spiritual and political necessity to avoid thoughtless reactions and to listen to the voices being lost in the cacophonous public space.

Wibben makes an important point about the need to tell stories. She writes:

So maybe there is 'something' that we can do indeed...Let us use our knowledge of global politics to find out who they were and carefully disentangle how our policies influenced their journeys. Let those stories inspire us to offer a helping hand – but also to identify points of resistance and demand policy changes.

My discomfort begins here. Who is this 'we' who has the 'knowledge' of global politics and where is this 'we' located? Why does this 'we' need inspiration from the stories of the suffering of others to 'do' 'something', to 'offer a helping hand'?

MacKenzie agrees that something must be 'done' but that something must be beyond the "liberal notion of 'activism' or just giving some money to an organization". 'Doing something' must include deep reflection on our own role in the refugee crises today. This desire to 'do something', I argue further is not just a short-lived emotional response to the tragic photograph of Aylan Kurdi, but lays bare our encounters with the 'other' for whom compassion must first be visually manufactured (through photographs) and then made available only by mitigating difference.

Sadly, Aylan Kurdi is not the first 'innocent' child who has perished; there are a thousand others dying everyday in bombings, at the sea, in containers, in boats, in detention centres, in terrorist attacks, in drone strikes. It is quite another matter that children are not 'innocent victims'; they exercise agency and are embedded in conflicts in very political ways. His father, Abdullah Kurdi (now battling human smuggling charges) wants his picture to be shared for a wider message, but his appeal alone cannot be the reason for our actions and neither should a picture be the medium for conveying a message that has been driven to us time and again. Why should any tragic picture become a rallying point for humanitarian action on a situation that has been unfolding for a very long time now? What does that tell us about the failure of our moral imagination that we continuously need visual reminders? How different does it make us from the perpetrators and patrons of violence who also rely on pictures to stir certain kinds of emotions? Susan Sontag reminded us of the impact of images (imbued with politics and identity) when she mentioned how the same photographs of children killed in the war shelling were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings (2003, p 9). As Arthur Kleinman observes, "we require ever more detail of hurt and suffering to authenticate the reality" (in Das et al: 2000, p 232). On this occasion, we want to authenticate the reality of Aylan Kurdi and other refugees through our stories, to awaken our conscience, and speak to humanitarian intentions. Isn't it more worrying that our conscience takes so long to awaken and is so quick to fall back asleep?

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And what of pictures we did not see, or we chose not to see? Sontag asks us to be vigilant about those pictures, those cruelties, those deaths that are not being shown (2003, p12). Images are an absence of presence (Shapiro: 1988, xii) or as Kleinman suggests, they erase the “politics, political economy, institutionalisation, and moral economy” of the disaster (in Das et al: 2000, p 233). Kleinman captures the angst some of us feel about the “mediatisation of violence and trauma in the global moral economy of our times” which makes real the voyeurism of witnessing at a distance (Ibid, p 232). Nothing is acutely at stake here for the observer except the unburdening of guilt. Already, ‘normalcy’ on social media is restored. Those mourning for Kurdi and posting his image with ‘gut wrenching’ messages of grief and solidarity have moved on to the next important thing; now the trend is feel/do good images of ‘welcoming refugees’ along with indulgent selfies and the usual markers of the good life untouched by the tragedies of the times.

Not long ago, we were telling stories of the dead children in Gaza and Peshawar. And before that we discussed the bullet-ridden body of a terrified teenage boy in Sri Lanka (who was declared the son of a ‘terrorist’). And much before that we were all confronted with the images of suffering naked children in the Vietnam War. Kevin Carter’s Pulitzer-winning picture of the vulture and the child in Sudan appeared at a time when there was no social media. Its affective impact was felt most profoundly by the photojournalist himself, leading him to commit suicide at the prime of his life and height of his fame. The impact of war and violence on children is nothing new and there are more than enough images accessible, if we truly needed one to make us care. As I scan through national news sites in South Asia everyday, countless images and reports of violence are accessible. Dead, mutilated, ‘rescued’ and sick bodies of children are a common sight. Recent news of a 11 year old girl carrying her sick brother to a hospital far away in the state of Jharkhand, India made me further reflect on why only some images/bodies matter.

Perhaps we just have short memories. Or maybe these and countless other children do not remind us of our ‘own’; do not point to the perils of parenting, and the vulnerability of our own children. We feel empathy only for those who are like us or remind us of those who are our ‘own’. There is something not right with this picture. I asked a colleague, a researcher on children and international relations and parent to a two-year-old boy herself, what she thought of the reactions over Aylan Kurdi’s picture. She said it was sad, but in a way she felt less emotionally affected. The body of Kurdi looked like any other child his age, lying on the beach. It is how her son would have been lying down at the beach and later carried by an adult while still asleep. You cannot read life or death from a mere picture. There is no visible face, skin complexion and Kurdi’s body is well dressed in shorts, t-shirt and shoes. There is no identifying this child as the ‘other’ as there is something distinctly familiar and everyday about him to Western audiences. Many social media messages around Aylan Kurdi read, ‘this could have been my child’, with the assertion of familiarity and sameness becoming an important rallying point for humanitarian actions. Empathy seems possible only by mitigating difference and ‘otherness’; compassion generated not because of the human suffering made visible through the picture of the dead child, but because of our witnessing of it on our terms, in the comfort of the spaces we inhabit, and in the context of our moral universe where there is little space for difference.

This is not just about the guilt of Western audiences but the manner in which the image has had an impact in other parts of the world. As Sontag says, “Photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create an illusion of consensus” (2003, p 5). This forged consensus is made visible through global media responses to Kurdi’s picture. Supriya Sharma mentions how the *Times of India* – a newspaper popular among middle class, English speaking Indians – cited the global outrage as the reason for publishing the picture of Aylan Kurdi. In a country where images of distressed, dead, and mutilated bodies have been normalised and media ethics has been dubious for a long time, this was a response to enable audiences to feel part of the global moment of sorrow. It allowed middle class Indians to mourn with the world, over a body far away, while ignoring the suffering in closer proximity to their everyday lives. The Times of India, in its new found wisdom about the connections between ‘shocking images’ and enhanced readership, has also recently launched a campaign inviting images from those ‘outside the newsroom’ to help tell a powerful story.

The spectacle of grief across the world is complete as we bear testimony to the terrible violence of our times. As we feel interconnected and affected by global events, the availability of social media space allows us to express and publish this affect, often without processing or thinking through the consequences. There is something narcissistic in our desire to always be ‘saying’ something, to be telling a story, sharing an opinion, which the world simply must

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hear.

I don't want to tell or hear a story about Aylan Kurdi's life and death. I am tired of telling and hearing stories that are more about the storytellers' self-righteousness, less about the subjects of the stories. Telling stories only makes us feel good about ourselves and, as we researchers and academics should know, doesn't change much for those whose stories we tell. Telling stories 'objectifies' people as we interpret events around their lives. The dead in particular have no power to challenge our narratives as we make 'careers' out of them as journalists, academics, researchers, bloggers, and policymakers.

If we are implicated in these stories of violence and in the lives of others (Butler: 2004, p 7), it is very important to also pause and reflect. Uttering may not always be necessary or important. There is no need for the world to know what we 'intend' to do or not because we are moved by these pictures (David Cameron says he is deeply moved too, by the way, as do other political elites whose policies may have been responsible for the fate of Kurdi and million others). The outpouring of self-important opinion, shame, pain, and grief we have witnessed on social media, speaks less about the images and the troubling violence of war or the life of refugees than it does about our neo-liberal social media guilt in these times and our desire to feel good as 'do gooders'. Social media philanthropy won't last, so let us not delude ourselves that this is a turning point in understanding and empathising with the refugee crisis or with those suffering in wars we have funded or created.

In reminding us of the precariousness of human lives and the politics of mourning, Judith Butler (2004) mentions the importance of hearing beyond what we are able to hear. Veena Das makes the distinction between voice and speech, how voices can be withdrawn and how some speeches may not be heard. As a feminist researcher, I try to be particularly mindful of this. We have all read that Mahatma Gandhi (whose 146th birth anniversary we marked on the 2nd of October 2015) practised 'maun vrat' (silent day) every week, using that opportunity to reflect and listen to his inner voice; to hear what he felt would go unnoticed. This was necessary to look beyond the discordant voices that surrounded him. In today's cacophonous public sphere, we are all competing to be heard, not to hear. In our attempts to be heard we make a spectacle out of a particular dead child, whose images help us create the proximity of familiarity and refashion our moral and political universe based on it. As Sontag points out, in this 'society of spectacle', we all desire to be one ourselves (the age of selfies!). "Reality has abdicated. There are only representations: media" (Sontag: 2003, p97). There is something inherently amoral about this desire to construct reality only through its representation; it prevents us from looking beyond the spectacle and hearing beyond our immediate surroundings.

Instead of being guided by an impulsive philanthropic urge to 'rescue' others, we have to first create the discursive space where various others may exist, where we can "reimagine what it is to belong to a human community in which common epistemological and cultural grounds cannot always be assumed." (Butler: 2004, p 38). In *The Responsibility of the Academy: A Call for Doing Homework*, Rauna Kuokkanen draws on Spivak to ask that we think about ways in which we can create the ethical discursive space for the 'other' to exist.

To establish ethical singularity with the subaltern requires painstaking effort that goes beyond speaking for the 'oppressed.' For Spivak, it is an intimate, individual engagement with the 'other', which occurs, in non-essential, non-totalizing and non-crisis terms. I would add that it also has to occur in non-salvage terms – the responsibility toward the other must not emerge from hierarchical relations that assume 'rescuing' the 'other' or knowing what is best for the 'other.' In short, ethical singularity must remain vigilant of not being co-opted in the service of benevolent imperialism....

The way out of this world of spectacles we have normalised is not to say more but to hear more, to grasp the hidden erasure of suffering in different contexts. This hearing is possible only when our effort to 'know' reaches beyond the public sphere, beyond the visibility of certain kinds of images alone. This hearing can be possible in the questions we ask of ourselves about why every tragedy must be a visual spectacle before we 'feel' anything. What we do to alleviate the grief and sense of loss Aylan Kurdi's picture engenders must not be mere personal gratification, but rather forging a meaningful political community where we debate consistently why only certain forms of human life are grievable (Butler: 2004, p 38). Is it too much to expect that people (academics and opinion makers included)

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would pause for a while and simply NOT say anything for a change; and instead make an effort to hear?

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About the author:

Swati Parashar is a lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. She teaches and researches on Feminist IR, Political Violence and South Asia.