

The Trajectory of a Viral Image

On the Afterlife of the Alan Kurdi Image

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People come to you, to your lens, as they would come to speak in a microphone. You assume a big responsibility then, you have to tell their stories; this means you must show their pictures.

- Sebastiao Salgado (in Berger, 2013: 174).

On 2 September 2015, an image shook the world: with his head down facing on one side and his bottom slightly up -- the way toddlers often sleep -- Alan Kurdi, a 3-year old, in a red shirt and blue shorts, was lying dead on the Turkish shore. Kurdi and his family were Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe on a boat that capsized in the Mediterranean Sea. Kurdi drowned with 11 other people and was washed ashore. Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir captured the iconic image -- Kurdi's lifeless body being approached by an official on the Turkish coast -- soon to make global headlines. It immediately went viral on the social media, on Twitter with the evocative hashtag #KıyıyaVuranİnsanlık, in Turkish meaning: Flotsam of Humanity.

In this paper, I am concerned not so much with the phenomenon that the image represents as with the 'capacity' of image to represent, and with the curious association between this 'capacity' to represent and the phenomenon it represents. What is it in *an* image that has the capacity to shame entire humanity, heterogenous as it is? To further complicate, how does a digital image -- a conglomeration of pixilated dots, devoid of any materiality whatsoever -- in its singularity generate 'affect', universalizable and synchronic across cultures? A closer look at the network analysis of the distribution and circulation of Kurdi's image, or a simple search with 'Alan Kurdi' on Google Trends will clearly reveal the extent of virality the image gained in and for a very short span of time¹. This characterizes what Bill Wasik (2009) calls 'nanostory'.

We allow ourselves to believe that a narrative is larger than itself, that it holds some portent for the long-term future; but soon enough we come to our senses, and the story, which cannot

¹ An overview can be found here: <https://goo.gl/Bf5NWR>. Website last visited on 28 June 2016.

bear the weight of what we have heaped upon it, dies almost as suddenly as it emerged (Wasik, 2009: 3).

How do the rise and fall of certain images -- the implications of 'nanostories', indeed so tellingly in the case of Kurdi's image -- then manage to leave behind a 'trace': a trace so evocative that it changes our perception of the represented phenomenon? How does the extraordinary revelatory potential of the image 'bring forth' something in a way we have never perceived before²?



Image credit: Nilüfer Demir. Source: <https://goo.gl/QzWDC6>. Non-copyrighted image. Several versions exist.

Kurdi's image depicts a tragic death. At most, it is indicative of the condition of precarity in which the migrants have to live. How does it then, when floated on social media, render visibility to the underlying discourse of Europe's refugee crisis in an expressive, but insistent way? In fact, the image had changed our disposition towards 'migration' as an ontological category. Our conversation on 'migration', following the circulation of this image, surprisingly converged on 'refugees', which has been attested to by Google Trends³. In this context, think of the images of: the Afghan girl on the cover of National Geographic; the student in front of the tank at Tiananmen Square; or the agonized face of the man, with folded hands and teary eyes, taken during the 2002 Gujarat riots in India.

² 'Bring(ing) forth' is a phrase that been appropriated from Heidegger. In this paper, I play on the phrase in the context of Kurdi's image. This phrase recurs in his writings on technology (Heidegger, 1977). In original German, Heidegger uses 'hervorbringen' hyphenated -- her(here)-vor(forth)-bringen(bring) -- to bring out the nuanced gamut of role of technology (*techne*) in bringing 'hither out of concealment, forth into unconcealment'.

³ For details, see: <https://goo.gl/Bf5NWR>. Website last visited on 28 June 2016.

Notwithstanding the emotions and ‘affects’ they arouse, these images have struck us and stuck with us because of their (re)construction of the ‘event’ that has been photographed. Here, I use ‘event’ in a Deleuzian (1993: 78) sense:

[T]he event is inseparably the objectification of one prehension and the subjectification of another; it is at once public and private, potential and real, participating in the becoming of another event and the subject of its own becoming.

It is the quality of ‘becoming’ that distinguishes these images. In the case of Kurdi’s image, this ‘becoming’ is actualized when it unfolds, rather *un-conceals* a whole new discourse on refugee crisis. The iconicity of this image cannot be explained by the notion of the ‘decisive moment’, to borrow Henri Cartier-Bresson’s oft-quoted phrase⁴. On the other hand, take the example of the image of the American sailor kissing a woman in white dress on victory over Japan (V-J Day) in Times Square at New York City. This image is no less iconic. The kiss had understandably lasted only for a while. The capturing of the fleeting moment from within the totality of time -- that ‘decisive moment’ -- leaves us in awe of the photographic marvel.

In contrast, think of Kurdi’s image. Kurdi’s body must have been at the shore for hours before it was removed. In fact, there are several versions of the image that went viral. The expression that the Afghan girl or the Gujarati man is wearing in the photographs does not seem to momentary either⁵. Or better still, in the case of the image of the tank-man at Tiananmen Square, photographer Jeff Widener, as we all know, had captured similar versions of the same image. More to it, the incident had been filmed and received global attention even in the pre-digital era. In that case, what explanatory apparatus other than the ‘decisive moment’ do we need to invoke to make sense of the iconicity of these images?

Taking off from here, we must engage with the question of ‘temporality’, indeed of the interiority of time in these images. I am particularly concerned with Kurdi’s image, using which as a case study I insist that the iconic photographs (as texts) that unfold around the subject of migration can paradoxically be read more as a commentary on time than movement. I want to explore one disposition central to these photographs – temporality – as they graphically represent the experiences of (im)migration, exile and so on. What I seek to understand is how photographs, in their graphical recounting of the spaces of (im)mobility, forge relationships with migration as a phenomenon. Since its inception, photography as a medium, though *still*, has played a crucial role in depicting movement: of people, objects, identities, ideas etc. The documentary and the evidentiary nature of photography have understandably contributed to this. However, the point is to ask: how do the photographs themselves move beyond regional-national-cultural paradigms in order to convey the

⁴ ‘Decisive moment’ is a phrase coined by Cartier-Bresson (1999: 16) to denote, in the context photography, ‘the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression’.

⁵ Steve McCurry photographed the Afghan girl. However, upon critical examination, many of McCurry’s seemingly ‘candid’ photographs, including that of the Afghan girl, have been revealed to staged and retouched. For details, see: <http://goo.gl/3gqQV0>. Website last visited on 28 June 2016.

‘essence’ of migration in photographic terms⁶? How do these photographs compel us to rethink the ‘inner’ coherence of an universal photographic language, if any, and (re)examine more minutely what it yields with respect to the (re)contextualization of the represented?

At this point, I want to stress on the problematic status of the ‘object’ of Kurdi’s photograph⁷. The image does not limit itself to documenting the ‘conditions of existence’ of the migrant. While bringing forth larger ‘truth’ about migration, it rather provokes a further thought on the status of the ‘object’ of photography, particularly in relation to its subject (the photographer, and by extension the viewer). What Deleuze (1989: xi) says of the ‘time-image’, though in the context of cinema, can be extrapolated to this context as well.

[T]he body is no longer exactly what moves; subject of movement or the instrument of action, it becomes rather the developer [revelateur] of time, it shows time through its tirednesses and waitings.

Kurdi is dead and his body is motionless, still. Well, for that matter, nothing in a photograph ever moves. But, my point of contention is that Kurdi, or better still the ‘migrant’, as the ‘object’ is not ‘the instrument of action’ here. In other words, the photograph does not unfold around its ‘object’. Implicit in the way Kurdi’s body is shown lying on the shore is an indication of the temporal duration -- what Deleuze would call ‘tirednesses and waitings’, rather than the ‘decisive moment’ -- of the event. Upon seeing the image, I know it is not the ‘flash’ or the *fleetingness* of time that arrests my attention. The camera here is witness to an event that was as if ‘tired and waiting’. So, when the ‘punctum’ of the image ‘rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’ (Barthes, 1981: 26), I tend to think that the event might have unfolded before me⁸.

I do not see the image through the photographer’s eye any longer. This removal of the intermediary subject (S1) -- the camera or the photographer -- provokes me as a ‘subject’

⁶ The tendency to impose a ‘national’ attribute to photography seems to be very recent. Right from the onset, classical semiotic assumptions on photography, unlike in the case of painting and cinema, have been based on its ecumenical language. This ‘universal language’ of photography, as Allan Sekula (1981) prefers to call it, deems an image to be decodable and comprehensible across trans-national audience, despite all cultural differences. However, recent historiography of photography often seeks to understand the medium as well as the oeuvre of certain photographers in ‘national’ terms. Entries on ‘national’ photography in *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph* (2005) or titles like *American Photography* in the Oxford History of Art series bear testimony to this.

⁷ The subject-object distinction in the case of photography, or for that matter, visual arts in general can often be confusing. The ‘subject’ may refer to one who conceives the image (the photographer, the painter etc.). It may also refer to the referent of the image (that what the image concerns) in terms of the compositional aspect of the frame. On the other hand, the ‘object’ may refer to what has been captured in the frame, what/who we study in the frame. Thinking in these terms, one can perceive the referent of an image in its duality: it can be both ‘subject’ and ‘object’ at the same time. However, in this paper, I use ‘object’ in the latter sense, while my use of ‘subject’ has two dimensions: S1 refers to the photographer and S2 refers to the viewers who view and study an image.

⁸ According to Roland Barthes (1981: 42), ‘punctum’ by ‘its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value’. It is that element in a photograph which appeals to the individual as a viewer.

(S2) to engage *directly* with the ‘object’ of the image. The image bridges a relationship between S2 and the ‘object’. According to Susan Sontag (1977: 18),

photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.

Along the same line, Urry (2002: 129) maintains that ‘[t]he objects and technologies of cameras and films have constituted... what images and memories should be brought back’. In other words, the medium or the intermediaries (S1) often decide for the viewers (S2) what to see and how to see, thereby reinforcing a hierarchy between the two levels of subjects. Conversely, in the case of Kurdi’s image, as a viewer I attain the rite of passage. I no longer need to be led by the hand; I can now indeed engage directly with the ‘object’ myself.

It is only when S1 stops initiating me *to see* that I start *see-ing*. Here, I want to make a distinction between *to see* and *see-ing*. Even though the blind person’s eye does not respond to the ‘external’ oculo-sensory stimulus, it does perceive *sight* (Derrida, 1993; Ray, 2014). *To see* is all about the optometry, the neural-sensory-motor responses in the optical nerves, while the act of *see-ing* is preconditioned upon the existence of and engagement from a (human) subject. For that matter, the dead person’s eyes might be able to see, the camera lenses indeed see; but what I call ‘ocular self’ is the prerequisite for the *perception* of sight (Ray, 2014). See-ing therefore involves us ‘to enter a universe of beings that display themselves, and... to look at an object is to inhabit it’ Merleau-Ponty (1962: 68). It is this relationality that makes an image worth engaging with. It is, in Nancy’s (2000: 68) words, the ‘simultaneity of being-with’, in this case the ‘object’ of the image, that makes certain larger ethos palpable to the onlooker. Nancy (2000) asserts that we perceive ourselves as individuals only in relation to, when in dialogue with, not necessarily in contrast to, others. Thinking in these terms, for Nancy (2000: 32), *being* by default means ‘being-with’: ‘the singularity of each being is indissociable from its being-with-many... because, in general, a singularity is indissociable from a plurality’. It is this *being-with-ness* that, I argue, characterizes the iconicity of Kurdi’s image.

The intermediary subject (S1) functions as an insulator, which keeps me (S2) from directly engaging with, in Ponty’s words, ‘inhabiting’ the ‘object’. It constantly reminds me of the pictoriality of the *re-presented*, and therefore, of the uninhabitability of the object in *re-presentation*. In getting rid of the S1, Kurdi’s image, on the other hand, serves a contrasting mnemonic function: it haunts our memory, it disturbs our conscience so much so that we can no longer choose not to ‘inhabit’ the larger ethos of the refugee crisis and the ‘foreigner’ question, otherwise disavowed. It immediately unfolds before us narratives concerning a highly contingent process of political partisanship, struggles over the meaning of nationhood and citizenship, and issues of territorialization. While public discourses concerning the migrant continue to invoke fear and anxiety, while the dialectic of the familiar and the foreign continue to define our understanding and organization of the ‘space’ we inhabit, one can reiterate David Simpson (2013: 3) in saying: the ramifications of the image are legal, ethical, and indeed comprehensively human: who is welcomed and who is turned

away? Who is a friend and who is an enemy? Who deserves the protection of the law and who is outside it? At what point does the working norm give way to the exception, and who gets to decide?

This ‘emancipatory potential’ -- that no longer limits my role as a spectator to merely witness the indexicality of the image, but gestures towards an inherent (self-)reflexivity -- helps me forge a unique relation with the image as well as with its ‘object’. Because of this emancipation, I cease to view this image in its singularity; I rather perceive the image as what Heidegger calls ‘world picture’⁹.

The spectator, for Ranciere (2010), is a paradoxical figure: the spectator is ignorant, docile and passive; and yet, no spectacle is complete without it having been viewed. Similarly, an image is an *image* only when viewed. The ‘ignorant’ spectator does not have the ‘authentic’ knowledge to interpret the spectacle; all she does is:

to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified (Ranciere, 2010: 12).

Thinking in these terms, Alan Kurdi’s image redeems our spectatorship. In illustrating how to ‘inhabit’ what is being seen, it actually redeems us from ignorance. Now, we know how to interpret the ‘event’. As unfolds before us in its totality, we acquire this ‘flash of knowledge’ with respect to the temporality of images¹⁰: that the singularity of the self is immersed in the plurality of the mass of the ‘they’, and, as Nancy (2000: 32) contends, ‘indissociable from its being-with-many’.

The extent of virality of the image is reflective of how ‘new’ media recycles contents from the ‘traditional’ media, in this case, photography, which reconfigures our visual register through successive ‘re-purposings’. When I share an image on the social media, I want to convey something buffer to what the image in its singularity conveys. In other words, there is a ‘purpose’ to why I share what I share, and where I share, why I immerse a singular image in the totality of what is out there on display. Botler and Grusin (1999) call this ‘remediation’. The politics of ‘remediation’ immanent in the virality of Kurdi’s image perhaps points to how we, as the emancipated spectators, meaningfully conflate the singularity of the image with its plurality. Singularities, in this case, become the

turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling; points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, “sensitive” points (Deleuze, 1990: 52).

The concept of ‘remediation’ thus pervades the trajectory and ‘afterlife’ of Kurdi’s image and suchlike, and in so doing, brings out our indeterminable, imprecise opinion on the

⁹ The ‘world picture’, for Heidegger (1977: 115-54), offers us a phenomenological experience of the world, rather than an objectivist re-presentation of the world *out there*. It our *situatedness* in the world, our *dissociability* that helps us perceive any representation in its totality.

¹⁰ I have paraphrased Weigel (2013) in appropriating this phrase.

phenomenon of migration itself, the many vicissitudes of our 'aporetic' take on the migrant. This is the larger 'truth' that comes out from the image.

Let me explain this with an anecdote. Allow me to take a detour at this point and the example of another image. In 2013, an image went viral on the social media. It was not as viral as Kurdi's though. Naturally, it was not as iconic as Kurdi's either. But the reason I invoke it here is that it shows with utmost clarity how vulnerable our opinion is when it comes to the migrant. The image was accompanied by a text that reads:

Pastor Jeremiah Steepok transformed himself into a homeless person and went to the 10,000 member church that he was to be introduced as the head pastor at that morning. He walked around his soon to be church for 30 minutes while it was filling with people for service....only 3 people out of the 7-10,000 people said hello to him. He asked people for change to buy food... NO ONE in the church gave him change. He went into the sanctuary to sit down in the front of the church and was asked by the ushers if he would please sit in the back. He greeted people to be greeted back with stares and dirty looks, with people looking down on him and judging him ('Pastor Present'; Online).

However, it has been exposed over the internet the story is fake. More to it, the photograph was also tailored to appear as the pastor-turned-vagabond, and was in fact of an unidentified homeless person who had no connection with the story whatsoever¹¹. It is one of those several captivating tales that are better told than enacted.

I ask the readers to note the narrative structure here. With a photograph of and a name for the pastor, and even seemingly 'realistic' figures, the story is written from a third person point of view in a journalistic style. It is pretty obvious that the narrative style has been maneuvered in order to trick the reader into believing it to be true. Anyway, the story unfolded with the homeless man discretely sitting in the back row of the church till he was introduced as the new pastor. He then walks up to the altar and recites excerpts from the biblical parable of 'The Sheep and The Goats' from the *Book of Matthew* for the audience, among which 'many began to cry and many heads were bowed in shame' (online). As evident from the symbolism here, the parable is meant to teach the audience in the church, and by extension the readers of the story, about the Christian value of compassion to strangers and poor.

I am not interested in the story per se or its (in)authenticity, but rather concerned with the ambivalence that the figure of the homeless migrant invokes. The narrative cuts across the central problematic concerning a fundamental enunciative paradox: the character (migrant) that is marginalized in real life is romanticized as the messianic Other when it comes to representation. What does this reflect of the relation between the two migrants: the real and the represented? How does this bear upon the friction between our fragmentary selves: our more impulsive present selves that cannot tolerate the migrant (purportedly) living off the tax-payer's money, and our aspirational future selves that see us as epitomes of ineffable

¹¹ For details, see: <http://goo.gl/kEZhn2>. Website last visited on 28 June 2016.

humanist values? In other words, how do the many vicissitudes and contradictions in our fragmentary selves, which is to say, the deeper implication of the simultaneity in our unwavering, but inharmonic, faiths in both Malthusian instrumentalism and (radical) humanist values, constitute our imagination of the ‘migrant’, making the figure latent with multiple meanings and disjunctive possibilities?

This bitter contradiction underscores the ‘affect’ in Kurdi’s image. Heidegger’s (1977: 3) prophetic formulation on technology -- ‘[t]he essence of technology is by no means technological’ -- can perhaps be transposed in the context of Kurdi’s image: the essence of this photograph seems to be by no means photographic. Rather, the heart of the image concerns, beyond the referent (refugee crisis), its representation (Kurdi’s image) or its referentiality, the ‘promiscuous entanglement’ -- to borrow Rita Felski’s (1995) phrase -- between our Malthusian selves and our rectitudinous selves¹².

Alan Kurdi lay dead on the shore, at the interstitial space where the sea meets the land. Can we read this intesticality as an allegory of the frontier between our dichotomous selves? As we are torn between contradictions, yet click the ‘share’ button on Kurdi’s image over social media, our conscience, after Sontag (1999), perhaps muses: ‘A photograph is not an opinion. Or is it’?

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¹² On the one hand, the image, within hours of going viral, boosted donations to charities for the migrants. The Migrant Offshore Aid Station, for example, recorded a 15-fold increase in donations. (<https://goo.gl/QzWDC6>). The EU-Turkey deal, on the other hand, advocating repatriation of ‘irregular’ migrants was signed barely within six months of Kurdi’s death. Now, these two phenomena cannot be more different.

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