Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

The Emotional and Political Power of Images of Suffering: Discursive Psychology and the Study of Visual Rhetoric

Book Section

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

oro.open.ac.uk

The emotional and political power of images of suffering:
Discursive psychology and the study of visual rhetoric

Jovan Byford

Chapter in: Stephen Gibson (ed.). *Discourse, peace, and conflict: Discursive psychology perspectives*, London, Springer, in press.

Please note that this is the version of the chapter accepted for publication, but before copy editing or typesetting. Thus, this version may not exactly replicate the authoritative document published in the book. It is not the copy of record.

On September 2, 2015, the body of the three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi washed up on a beach near the resort town of Bodrum in western Turkey. The boy had drowned earlier that morning, alongside his five-year-old brother Galib and mother Rehan, when the small inflatable boat in which they tried to reach the Greek island of Kos, capsized shortly after setting off on the precarious night-time voyage.[1]

Alan Kurdi's name and tragic fate would probably have remained unknown to the wider world were it not for the series of photographs of the boy's dead body taken by the Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir. Although Demir took several dozen photographs of the aftermath of the boating tragedy, two images (of which there are several versions) captured the imagination of the public: one was of the boy's body lying face down in the surf, and the other of a Turkish policeman cradling the lifeless toddler in his arms.

Mainly through the power of Twitter and other social media platforms, these photographs became an instant internet sensation, reaching over 20 million users in less than 24 hours (D'Orazio, 2016). Instrumental in their global diffusion was widespread coverage in the mainstream media, which devoted attention not just to the boy's fate and the broader refugee crisis, but also the seemingly unprecedented impact of the photographs on public imagination and political discourse, and the ethical issues surrounding their publication. Within days, the death of Alan Kurdi became a potent symbol of the plight of refugee children, and a reminder of the, at least temporary, political power of visual images.

The role of photographs as vehicles for imagining and remembering war and notable peace-time disasters, is well documented. Since the early 20th Century, dramatic events have been frequently represented through symbolic and poignant images that captured (but also produced and perpetuated) what was deemed to be the essence of human suffering (Zelizer, 2004, Sontag, 2003). However, the impact of the Kurdi images was seen by many as novel and unique. In the modern, digital age, defined by the ubiquity of the camera, the hyperproduction of visual images and their instant dissemination via the internet, it seemed remarkable that a single photographed event was still able to provoke such outpouring of sympathy and generate a sense of common purpose. Thus, many saw the responses to the death of Alan Kurdi as a radically new phenomenon, the marker of a new 'regime of visuality' for the social media age, and a new form of global citizenship exercised through an internet 'meme', through an image gone 'viral' (Goriunova & Vis, 2015).

---

[1] The deceased boy's name was initially reported as Aylan Kurdi, before it was changed to Alan, the correct transliteration of the Kurdish name. This chapter will refer to the boy as Alan throughout, except when quoting from sources where the different spelling appears in the original.

Responses to the publication of the photographs of Alan Kurdi's body touch upon issues that are of intrinsic interest to peace psychologists. First is the apparent *emotional* power attributed to the photographs. Responses from journalists, politicians, representatives of advocacy groups, ordinary members of public, and so on, especially in the west, were replete with references to emotional states provoked by the images – shock, outrage, compassion – but also bodily reactions – the sense of being 'punched in the stomach', 'gut-wrenched', 'heart-wrenched', 'sickened', 'moved to tears', etc. These strong, affective reactions were, for the most part, treated as natural, involuntary responses to the sight of the dead boy, reinforcing the widely-held belief that visual images, more so than other modes of representation (news reports, documentary evidence, or testimonies) have the power to elicit emotions, and move the audience on an instinctive, 'visceral' level (e.g. Butler, 2007, Goldberg, 1991, Sontag, 2003, Zelizer, 2004).

The second and related issue is that the emotional experiences, or, more specifically, the publicly avowed claims to those experiences, were as much about social relationships, identity and norms that govern pro-social behaviour and civic responsibility, as about internal mental states. An imagined, transnational 'community of mourning' (Kear & Steinberg, 1999) formed around a shared cluster of emotions, and did so in a way that was directly political. The boy's death was a summons to *do* something, or at least to take a stance.

The present chapter looks more closely at the link between visual images of human suffering, emotions and political mobilisation. How do we account for this, seemingly inevitable, link? Also, how are images constituted as emotionally and politically moving, and how does an instance of suffering become a symbol for public consumption? Finally, what is it specifically about the images of Alan Kurdi's dead body that made them uniquely newsworthy, affecting, and recognisable as a source of emotional investment?

The starting point of the present analysis is the discursive psychological approach to the study of emotion. Ever since the late 1980s, discursive psychologists have argued that verbal or embodied expressions of feelings should be regarded not as more or less accurate descriptions of a corresponding internal, mental state, but as discursive phenomena and social acts. When people use emotion words, when they avow, describe, ascribe, deny, or account for emotions, their own and those of other people, they are doing socially and rhetorically meaningful things (Edwards, 1997, 1999, Harré, 1987, Harré and Gillett, 1994, see also Hepburn, 2004, Wetherell, 2012, Childs & Hepburn, 2015). For instance, the claim to have been 'upset' or 'made angry' by something, or that someone has acted 'emotionally' carries specific moral weight in the context of an argument and can be mobilised to justify or contest a position or interpretation, manage accountability, persuade others, and so on (Potter, 2012). The focus of much discursive psychological work on emotion has been on how the rich thesaurus of emotion terms is deployed in everyday, often mundane, situations to manage some relevant social, or interactional, 'business'.

The present chapter, however, seeks to move beyond this kind of 'micro' analysis of discourse, centred on the occasioned use of emotion terms. Common-sense understanding of emotions, and the normative order that governs their public display and rhetorical use – what Wetherell (2012, p. 93) calls the 'lay ethnopsychologies of emotion' – are embedded in structured, but also inherently argumentative, interpretative frameworks and social practices which configure human experience (also Wetherell, 1998). Examining these frameworks and practices requires a shift away from looking at specific instances of *how* people use the vocabulary of feelings to manage accountability and negotiate their way through the prevailing moral order, to exploring *why*, in a specific social, cultural and historical context, certain kinds of emotions or emotional responses are constituted as relevant, and recognised as an appropriate (albeit contestable) resource for 'doing' things. Or indeed why some objects, such as photographs, or events, such as a death, are constructed as 'shocking', 'heart-breaking', or 'harrowing'. Crucially, this broader, 'macro' analysis does not preclude analysing the situated use of emotion terms and details of rhetoric. On the contrary it involves doing so, but while also broadening the examination to 'how discursive threads with longer

histories and conventional and communal powers weave in and out of the local order' and permeate the texture of everyday talk, and experience (Wetherell, 2012, p.100; also Wetherell, 1998).

The present chapter will, therefore, use the Kurdi photographs to explore the culturally specific conventions and codes through which the assumption about the emotional and political power of images, and specifically *these* images is constituted, and maintained as part of the ideological common sense. The specific focus of the chapter is *spectatorial sympathy*, as a distinct social practice which mediates the relevance of particular emotions and emotional reactions to images of suffering, and through which certain images are constituted as topics of humanitarian concern.

In examining the impact of the Kurdi photographs, we will also take a road less travelled in discursive psychology and consider the possibilities of extending this approach more directly towards the study of visual material. Historically, analyses of discourse have privileged talk and text as the 'primary arena for human action, understanding and intersubjectivity' (Potter, 2012, p. 114), acknowledging visual material solely as a topic of conversation. Edwards & Middleton's (1988) analysis of conversational remembering around family snapshots is a relevant example. In the study, the authors showed that looking through, and talking about family photographs provides a rich social and communicative setting within which children develop the skills of joint, conversational remembering and learn how to 'take meaning' from a photograph. However, while Edwards & Middleton (1988, p.7) acknowledge that photographs are 'semiotically and culturally meaningful things' whose form, content, creation, and usage are regulated by a set of culturally specific conventions, their analysis focused entirely on conversations *about* photographs. The family snapshots were neither shown, nor examined. They were occasionally described, with the descriptions restricted to those features that were attended to by the participants. The emphasis was, therefore, on photographs as a 'rich stimulant of joint remembering' (Middleton & Edwards, 1988, p.7), without acknowledging that the photographs themselves (i.e. their content, form and composition, and their existence as material objects), as well as the complex social practices involved in their creation and preservation, are also constitutive of, and intrinsic to, the activity of joint, family remembering.

The reluctance within discursive psychology to engage more directly with visual material can be attributed to the fact that its theoretical, philosophical and empirical roots lie in traditions and approaches that focus on written and spoken language and offer tools for their analysis. Also, as Frith et al. (2005) point out, there is a deeply entrenched belief within psychology more generally that the polysemic nature of images and the subjective nature of what Stuart Hall (1973) calls their 'connotative code', makes them less amenable to systematic, empirical examination of the kind that might be possible with verbal data. The assumed 'subjective' nature of images is, arguably, why talk *about* images is deemed such a useful tool in the study of subjectivity (Reavey & Johnson, 2008).

Yet when examining discourses surrounding iconic images of human suffering, the neglect of visual analysis becomes hard to justify. How can we study the emotional and political power of images without analysing photographs themselves, without examining their aesthetic features, their symbolism and connotative force, or without scrutinising what they show and what they conceal? After all, visual methodologies developed over the past half century, which ushered in a 'pictorial turn' in arts and humanities (Mitchell, 1994) have supplied ample evidence of the benefits of engaging in interpretation of symbols, cultural signs, and meanings in visual texts, particularly when unpicking the ideological power of images (e.g. Barthes, 2000, 2009, Berger, 2013, Hall, 1973, Sontag, 1977, 2003, Helmers & Hill, 2004, p.19-20). More recently, several authors have emphasised the inherently performative nature of photography, arguing that visual images are themselves rhetorical and action-oriented; they are stances in an argument, deployed, often alongside words, to get things done (Ash, 2005, Levin, 2009, Taylor, 2003, Azoulay, 2008). So, the present chapter can be seen as a preliminary inquiry into how one might bring the analysis of visual rhetoric into discursive analysis, and enrich the examination of the talk *about* images, with a closer look at their aesthetic and symbolic properties, and institutional and social practices that inform their production and dissemination.

Looking as a morally accountable activity

In accounts of the public impact of the death of Alan Kurdi, there has been a tendency to assume that, because Twitter and Facebook played an important role in the dissemination of the photographs, this was a spontaneous, global, 'bottom up' phenomenon, which largely bypassed traditional, more institutionalised channels through which news about humanitarian crises are usually disseminated. The public's emotional reaction was seen as the *source* of the media story, in that the traditional media found themselves merely reporting on, or responding to, an unprecedented and unforeseen outburst of sympathy.

However, the analysis of the evolution of the story on Twitter in the hours immediately after the images first appeared on the website of the Turkish news agency DHA, suggests otherwise (D'Orazio, 2015). Among the first disseminators of the images were journalists and activists campaigning on behalf of Syrian refugees, who by the very nature of their social, and professional, networks had a comparatively large number of followers. Their activity enabled the images to cascade down not just to more users, but also to other influential individuals, among them fellow journalists and charity workers, politicians, public figures, and so on, many of whom were similarly eager to turn Alan Kurdi's death into a humanitarian cause (see Fehrenbach & Rododgno, 2015a). This eventually ensured the uptake of the images by the mainstream media, including all the major outlets in the UK. It was, in fact, only after the images went 'mainstream' that they also went 'viral' on social networks (D'Orazio, 2015).

The role of the mass media in the global diffusion of the Kurdi images is important because it suggests that between the photographs and the public's emotional response, was a complex process of mediation, what Zelizer (2004, p.115) defined as the 'maze of practices and standards, both explicit and implicit, by which photographers, photographic editors, news editors, and journalists decide how war can be reduced to a photograph'. In this case, mediation involved working up the images as an emotionally relevant, viewable object of humanitarian interest.

Whenever there is a conflict or natural disaster, newspaper picture desks face an influx of troubling imagery, often involving children, which come in via news agencies, or increasingly, social networks (Tooth, 2014). Such images present a quandary for mainstream news outlets. Western media generally refrain from publishing graphic images of death and suffering, particularly those showing children, mainly because of concerns about the dignity of the victims, and to avoid offending the sensibilities of the audience. Moreover, dissemination of distressing images leaves the media open to accusations that they are engaging in sensationalism, or that they are seeking to profit from the disaster by satisfying the public's morbid curiosity and unsavoury need for 'atrocity porn'. At the same time, not publishing distressing images leaves them exposed to charges that they are concealing the 'truth' or sanitising the brutal realities of war. News editors as 'visual gatekeepers' must therefore make, and justify, decisions that will often test the boundaries of responsible, ethical journalism, and balance the competing demands of, on the one hand, newsworthiness, and on the other hand, public sensibility, and the dignity and privacy of victims.

Shahira Fahmy (2005) has shown that despite the existence of various codes of practice and ethics guidelines, editorial decisions about the use of controversial imagery are inherently subjective, and based mainly on journalistic 'instinct', political leanings and actual, or anticipated, actions of competitors. The images of Alan Kurdi's body offer a good example of how the media manage competing obligations, and how the framing of images, and the emphasis on their emotional resonance, becomes inherently tied up with the media's handling of their own accountability for publishing photographs of a dead child.

As soon as the images of Alan Kurdi's body appeared on the front covers of newspapers, the decision to publish them became part of the news story. Many daily newspapers explicitly acknowledged the controversial nature of their decision and sought to justify it. Consider the following examples:

We didn't rush to publish […] We verified the photographs and waited for a full story before publication. The enormous poignancy and potential power of the photographs was evident from the start. Could they be the images that provided a tipping point? Would public sympathy, and perhaps anger at Britain's role as an apparent bystander in this saga, be moved by them? We decided that both of these were highly likely. Those factors had to be balanced again [*sic*] the real shock that some readers would feel. (Paul Johnson, *Guardian* web editor, in Fahey, 2015)

Ultimately, we felt – and still do – that the power to shock is a vital instrument of journalism, and therefore democracy. Our motivation wasn't avaricious; it was to shock the world into action, to improve refugee policy – which is why the accompanying editorial and petition had clear policy recommendations – and to put pressure on a Prime Minister whose behaviour in this crisis has been embarrassing. We hoped some good may yet be salvaged from the appalling fate of poor Aylan, and thousands like him. (*The Independent*, Rajan, 2015),

"the world must see the truth in order to change". Strong photos "arouse emotions. They show beautiful, but also cruel moments. They let us sympathise with other people." (editorial in the German daily *Bild*, cited in Henley, 2015)

The image is not offensive, it is not gory, it is not tasteless — it is merely heartbreaking, and stark testimony of an unfolding human tragedy that is playing out in Syria, Turkey and Europe, often unwitnessed […] We have written stories about hundreds of migrants dead in capsized boats, sweltering trucks, lonely rail lines, but it took a tiny boy on a beach to really bring it home to those readers who may not yet have grasped the magnitude of the migrant crisis. [Kim Murphy, the assistant managing editor of *The Los Angeles Times*, cited in Makey, 2015]

Evident in these examples is a surprisingly uniform, three-fold argument for why the images were printed. First, claims such as that the world 'must see the truth in order to change' or that it is the task of newspapers to 'bring it home', imply that publication was necessary, because of the need to draw attention to an important, tragic event, which would otherwise have been overlooked. Second, it is assumed that this had to be done through images because of their 'enormous poignancy and potential power'. Crucially, this power lay not in their evidentiary or documentary value, but in their ability to 'arouse emotion' and 'shock the world into action'. Third, it was implied that the Kurdi images were exceptional, in their horror and emotional impact: they had a unique ability to capture the 'magnitude of the migrant crisis', succeed where 'stories' failed, and offer a potential 'tipping point'. The emphasis on the singularity of the Kurdi images is unsurprising, because editorial decisions to print graphic images of violence are related to (and can be accounted for by) the perceived scale of the event. The more significant or extraordinary a news story, the less important it becomes to 'hold anything back' (Fahmy, 2005, p.159).

Identical arguments were to be found even in publications such as *The Sun*, or the *Daily Mail*, which have traditionally taken a less sympathetic, and occasionally hostile stance towards refugees. The *Daily Mail* stated on its front page that the images 'could not be more harrowing – but must be seen to comprehend the gravity of the migrant crisis engulfing Europe', while *The Sun* described the images as a 'heartbreaking symbol of the migrant crisis' and demanded of the government to 'solve this tragedy'. Therefore, across the political and media spectrum, the initial decision to publish the images was presented as controversial, but well thought through, in the public interest, and well intentioned. What is more, it was argued that what made these images publishable was not that they were not excessively distressing, but on the contrary, that the images *must* be seen, and disseminated, *because* they are 'shocking' and 'heart-breaking', and because they can make a difference. As Burns (2015, p.38) put it, the message being conveyed was that it was 'acceptable to look at and share a

photograph of a dead child if that is perceived to do something, or somehow improve the situation that otherwise seems overwhelmingly complex'.

This framing of the images as belonging to the genre of 'photography of conscience' (Sontag, 2003), was not limited to opinion pieces which reflected on the journalistic decision; it featured in the descriptions of the very event being reported. The headline on the front page of *The Independent* on the day after the body of Alan Kurdi was discovered, is probably the most illustrative example, because it captured, within a single sentence (one character short of the length of a Twitter post), all the elements of the aforementioned threefold argument: '*IF THESE EXTRAORDINARILY POWERFUL IMAGES OF A DEAD SYRIAN CHILD WASHED UP ON A BEACH DON'T CHANGE EUROPE'S ATTITUDE TO REFUGEES, WHAT WILL*?' (*The Independent*, September 3, 2015). Kurdi photographs were introduced as an *extraordinary* instance of a category of images that are inherently *powerful* and have the capacity to *change attitudes*. The account *of* the images was, therefore, at the same time an account *for* looking at, or publishing them.

Importantly, it was not just the media that had to manage their moral accountability for viewing and disseminating the images, and in doing so negotiate a normatively positive place for themselves within the prevailing moral order. Looking at the images of a dead child is, in most contexts, an accountable activity. Politicians, journalists, activists, commentators, but also ordinary members of the public communicating via social media, all engaged in similar rhetorical work. When describing and discussing the images, they too appealed to the link between images, emotion, and action, they worked up their feelings about the boy's death as natural, appropriate, and genuine, and accounted for the sincerity of their motives and actions. They endeavoured to show that they gazed at, or even shared photographs of a dead child, but that their motives for doing so were benevolent rather than self-serving, or perverse.

And yet, all this accounting contained an important omission. The assumption that visual evidence in general, and the Kurdi images in particular, possess superior ability to provoke sympathetic concern, was taken for granted. Nowhere were we told *why* the world needs to 'see the truth in order to change it', or why images succeed where 'stories' fail. Or what made the 'enormous poignancy and potential power' of these images immediately obvious, and what differentiated them, in terms of their emotional power, from other images of dead children. These assumptions, and the corresponding sentiments, were all meant to be understood and accepted instinctively, and unquestioningly, by the good-hearted audience who, operating within the same framework of meaning and moral order, would recognise, and share them. In other words, speakers were relying on, and reproducing an ideological common sense about the intrinsic link between images, emotions and action.

'Moving images' and the practice of spectatorial sympathy

In recent years there have been some, largely speculative, attempts to provide a scientific explanation for the association between images, emotion, and social action, drawing on neuroscience and evolutionary biology. Joshua Sarinana, a neuroscientist at the Harvard Medical School, writes, for instance, that the link between photography, empathy, and altruism is 'deeply ingrained into the architecture of our brain' and that 'photography plays a unique role in triggering the network of brain regions that underlie empathy'. Therefore, he suggests, photographs '*undoubtedly* appeal to our emotions and our yearning to help those in need' (Sarinana, 2014, emphasis added).

Such essentialist explanations do not stand up to scrutiny, however. There is nothing inevitable, or natural, about human empathy. Children are frequent casualties of war, and images depicting their dead bodies are not uncommon. Yet few make it to the front pages of newspapers or become part of a humanitarian cause. So, as Gregory (2015) points out, the peculiar thing about images depicting the dead, the injured or the needy is not that they provoke a wave of compassion, but that they do so rarely. Also, the power of images of suffering is short-lived: according to the European Journalism Observatory, which examined the coverage of the Kurdi death in eight countries across

Europe, any notable effect on public debate all but disappeared within just ten days (European Journalism Observatory, 2015).

The common-sense assumptions about the power of images can be much more productively explored as products of culture rather than nature; as ideological constructs with a distinct social and cultural history. In fact, until the 18th Century, the contention that one might feel emotionally moved by the suffering of strangers would have seemed distinctly alien: the 'affective barrier' between any individual and the outside world seldom extended further than the immediate family, friends, or community (Friedland, 2012). People were seen as predisposed mainly towards self-interest and self-love (Fiering, 1976), and while Christian iconography was replete with imagery of suffering, the emphasis there was on the inevitability of pain and its redemptive potential, not empathy (Eisenman, 2007).

It was only in the 1700s, that the broader project of Enlightenment ushered in a 'sentimental revolution' which instituted the idea of visually mediated humanitarian concern as an intrinsic, and divinely ordained part of human 'nature' (Fiering, 1976, p.212, also Arendt, 1963). At that time, a new generation of moral philosophers including the Third Earl of Shaftsbury, William Wollaston, Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, offered a view of 'human nature' as defined by a fundamental moral sense and benevolence towards others (Halttunen, 1995). The emerging doctrine of 'irresistible compassion' manifested itself as a basic psychological principle, namely that 'men [*sic*] irresistibly have compassion for the suffering of others and are equally irresistibly moved to alleviate that suffering' (Fiering, 1976, p. 195). This 'secular sanctification of compassion' (ibid, p. 198) and its key corollary, the view of pain as unacceptable and repulsive, gained wider social and political currency in part because it offered an intellectual and moral standpoint from which to advocate humanitarian reform, namely, the abolition of slavery, torture, corporal punishment, and other violent practices which were now deemed cruel, offensive, uncivilised and 'unnatural' (Halttunen, 1995).

In articulating the idea of a natural humanitarian impulse, writers were heavily influenced by John Locke's emphasis on vision as the primary sense. *Viewing* the anguish of others was believed to enhance psychological proximity to the suffering of strangers and was thus instrumental in triggering empathy. The assumed association between compassion and spectatorship, which Dwyer (1987) labelled *spectatorial sympathy*, lead to a proliferation of visual representations of suffering, initially in the form of sentimental art. Humanitarian reformers also embraced the assumed power of the visual, and supplemented the often sensationalist descriptions of violence with artistic representations of the most brutal practices which they sought to outlaw, all with the aim of awakening, and cultivating, humanitarian sensibility in the audience.

The link between humanitarian advocacy and spectatorial sympathy became even more prominent in the late 19th and early 20th Century, when the rapid development of photographic technology, with its rhetoric of realism and truth, revolutionised how evidence of suffering could be presented visually (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015). Photographic images have been at the core of humanitarian campaigns ever since, underpinning the 'manipulative emotional appeals' which remain an inherent feature of organised humanitarianism (Rozario, 2003, p.419).

In constructing human compassion as instinctive and 'natural', 18th Century moral philosophy was effectively establishing a new moral order and initiating a new 'historical stage in the education of the emotions' (Fiering, 1976, p.212). It did so by turning empathy towards strangers into a marker of virtue. Compassion became something to be *displayed* and *performed* through emotionally-charged words and actions (gasping or recoiling when faced with evidence of suffering), through charity work and philanthropy, or simply by calling for something to be done. Therefore, spectatorial sympathy refers not just to an abstract link between emotion, spectatorship and action, but to a set of discursive and embodied *practices* through which a visually facilitated humanitarian sentiment is articulated, and enacted.

Importantly for the present discussion, the practice of spectatorial sympathy had, from the outset, an argumentative texture, driven by a fundamental contradiction: it mandated engagement with visual material that was often constructed as too repulsive to watch. The same sentimental ethics that

made the pain of others intolerable, made it also a source of public fascination. This revealed the possibility that the pain of others was a potential source of *pleasure*: the pleasure of one's own virtue manifested in the experience of empathy, or relief provoked by the realisation that one has been spared from the observed suffering. Susan Sontag (2003) alluded to a further dimension of the pleasures of spectatorship when she wrote that moral satisfaction can be derived both from the act of flinching before images of unbearable suffering, and from the knowledge that one can look at the image *without* flinching.

The prospect of pleasure being derived from watching images of death and suffering, but also the emerging concern that indulgence in such material might stifle one's instinctive humanitarian response, or even worse, arouse a perverse affinity for cruelty, shaped the argumentative context within which images of suffering have been circulating ever since (Halttunen, 1995). In fact, when one reads the late 18th and early 19th Century writing about the natural humanitarian impulse, it is striking how closely the arguments align with those in evidence today, in both academic and popular discourse. Then, just like today, those participating in the spectacle of suffering 'filled their writing with close descriptions of their own immediate emotional response' to demonstrate the purity of their sensibilities (Halttunen, 1995, p.326), they linked the act of viewing to meaningful action lest they should be seen as merely 'feasting upon the consciousness of our own virtue' (Barbauld, 1773, p.174), or 'gratifying a morbid appetite' (Wright, 1846, p.iii). They debated the relationship between 'feeling' and 'doing': talking about what one has seen and how they were personally affected was, just like today, intrinsically tied up with the act of *adopting a stance*, or committing to a cause (Boltanski, 1999).

Tracing the history of spectatorial sympathy is important because it suggests that emotional displays, verbal or otherwise, that permeated the responses to the images of Alan Kurdi, are embedded in culturally specific discourses and practices, which shape both the sources of moral accountability associated with the act of looking at an image of a dead child, and the ways of managing them. And yet, as we shall see, spectatorial sympathy does not influence just the reading of, and responses to, images. It influences also the images themselves; it informs the various representational practices and aesthetic conventions that makes some images recognisable icons of suffering, and renders some deaths more visible, politically consequential and 'grievable' than others (Butler, 2007).

Images of suffering children and the aesthetics of humanitarianism

The central feature of the Kurdi images, from which they draw their symbolic power, is undoubtedly that they represent a dead *child*. Ever since the movement to end the atrocities in the Belgian Congo in the 1890s, photographs of suffering or dead children have been a staple ingredient of visually mediated compassion (Fehrenbach & Rododgno, 2015a). The coming together of spectatorial sympathy, and the 19th century invention, and idealisation, of childhood (and especially the motifs of innocence and vulnerability) have encouraged campaigners to develop a distinct 'iconography of childhood' which includes the trope of the lone suffering child, or the child being cradled by an adult in the manner of the Pietà (Fehrenbach, 2015, p. 166). There is no doubt that, out of several dozen images taken that day on the beach near Bodrum, the two 'iconic' images of Alan Kurdi's body, were selected for dissemination because they fitted the established conventions of humanitarian photography, and in the knowledge that they would be read as such.

In fact, the familiar 'iconography of childhood' can be said to have influenced the *creation* of the images in the first place. As Zelizer (2004) points out, in today's highly competitive media market, what makes a news image stand out, and more importantly, what makes it memorable and durable, 'defining' and 'iconic' is that it meets certain aesthetic expectations and is recognisably symbolic, connotative, dramatic, and vivid. This leads to a reliance on a set of interpretative strategies, and familiar visual tropes, including that of the dead child. The point being made here is not that Nilüfer Demir, the photographer behind the Kurdi images, was intentionally reproducing a

photo-journalistic cliché, but rather that what made that scene worth photographing is that it conformed to a set of established conventions, well represented in the history of award-winning news photography, or compilations of 'iconic', 'heart-breaking' images.

And yet, the image of a dead child does not in itself make a global phenomenon. So, what is it about the Kurdi images that made them such a prominent icon of the refugee experience?

The rhetorical use of visual images of suffering involves a specific moral framing, based on what Azoulay (2008, p.25) calls the 'pragmatics of obligation'. Recipients of the humanitarian message are not just expected to care; they are expected to accept responsibility for the problem and take appropriate action. The audience must be *shamed* into doing something to alleviate the observed suffering (Ash, 2005). For this moral rhetoric to work in the contemporary political context, both the 'problem' and the 'solution' need to be distinctly *humanitarian* in nature, and 'we' (often 'the west', to whose gaze the victims are exposed) need to be identifiably accountable.

In the case of the Kurdi images, this rhetoric of shaming is revealed in the location of the boy's body (the beach) and the cause of death (drowning). Had the image been of a child killed by the so-called Islamic State, the Syrian Army or Russian air strikes, it would have been much more difficult to frame the death in strictly humanitarian terms and invoke the rhetoric of shame. Blame would have been attributable to a specific side in the military conflict, rather than the 'inaction' of those for whom the image was intended. It also would have introduced the option of western military action, a controversial proposition in the post-Iraq world characterised by intervention fatigue. The fact that Alan Kurdi drowned on Europe's border, rather than being killed, for instance, on the streets of Aleppo, allowed for the geographical, and political, distance to be maintained between the plight of the refugees, and its underlying (military) cause. It allowed for the problem to be constituted as *humanitarian* as opposed to *military*, and it foregrounded the accountability of western governments on whose 'doorstep' the boy died. Therefore, the image itself reflected, while at the same time reinforcing, a particular framing of the refugee crisis, its causes and possible solutions.

Also, the photographs of Alan Kurdi's body are inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, they are highly graphic in their portrayal of violent death: they show the body of a child that the viewer knows is dead. Yet at the same time, the body does not 'look' dead. There are no signs of putrefaction or bloating, common in cases of drowning, there is no blood or other signs of physical trauma. In fact, in responses to the photograph of the body lying face down in the sand, one frequently encounters comparisons to a 'sleeping child': the posture of the body is said to be reminiscent of the 'awkward sleeping position' of toddlers (Drainville, 2015, p.47). The sanitised and aestheticized representation of death makes the image seem 'taboo breaking' – in the context of journalistic conventions that generally proscribe the publication of images of dead children – but also inoffensive, because it aligns with the sensibilities of an audience accustomed to funereal practices that make the dead look as if they are asleep. This ambiguity made the photograph of Alan Kurdi's body both controversial and publishable and, therefore, inherently newsworthy. What is more, the condition of the body itself appeals to the sense of shame in the audience: it suggests that the boy had only just died, and therefore, that assistance, symbolised by the figure of the Turkish policeman, arrived just a little too late. In the best known of the Kurdi images, in which the boy's body is lying alone, face down in the sand, the viewer is effectively invited to look at the boy through the gaze of the first responders, and reflect on their culpability for not 'getting there' (in terms of responding to the refugee crisis) sooner.

The ambiguity of the images is important also because it captured the two lenses through which the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean is often perceived: the forensic lens, which views dead or suffering migrant bodies as evidence of a crime (war crimes, trafficking, but also the western governments' inaction), and the lens of memory whereby the body becomes the 'reference point for mourning and the addressing of trauma' (Kovras & Robins, 2016). The photograph of the body in the sand resembles, at the same time, an artistically unpretentious forensic photograph, which gives it an aura of authenticity and referentiality (McCabe, 2015), and a work of art that uses the 'moral figure of the child' (Malkki, 2010) and the motif of childhood innocence, to capture the tragedy of the refugee experience. The latter dimension is especially apparent in the large number of 'surrogate' images,

artistic manipulations of the original photographs created by illustrators and graphic designers, which sought to moderate the explicitness of the original photographs, while foregrounding their wider symbolism (Drainville, 2015).

Perhaps most importantly, the images of Alan Kurdi's body owe their public prominence to the fact that they struck a balance between the rhetoric of similarity and difference that underpins humanitarian photography. Since its inception, humanitarian imagery has been instrumental in representing *distant suffering*, the anguish of people who are both culturally and geographically removed from those to whose gaze they are being subjected. Distance, after all, is what made Alan Kurdi's dead body visible in the first place: no British media outlet would ever have published an explicit image of a dead British child washed up on a beach.

There are two principle reasons for this emphasis on *distant* suffering. The first and obvious reason is that only distant suffering needs to be 'brought home' through affecting images. Suffering close by is already visible, or perceptible in other ways. The second reason is that historically, humanitarian imagery has been instrumental in fostering the ideology of racial and class difference, presenting populations in need as 'passive but pathetic objects capable only of offering themselves up to a benevolent, transient gaze' of those on whose compassion they supposedly depend (Tagg, 1988, p.12). The sense of entitlement to watch the suffering of distant others, supposedly for their benefit, is inherent in the practice of spectatorial sympathy and the moral order underpinning international humanitarianism.

The distance between the spectator and the suffering victim is never absolute, however. Humanitarian mobilisation depends on the process of identification: the distant victim must be made to resemble 'us' (Douglas, 1994). Thus, in accounting for why they were moved by the death of Alan Kurdi, journalists, public figures and users of social media often focused not just on the boy's pose, but also his attire, especially his shoes (Procter & Yamada-Rice, 2015, Tharoor, 2015). This focus on shoes was facilitated by the fact that in one of the widely-circulated versions of the image, the angle of the shot and the composition of the image made the boy's feet a salient feature. On a symbolic level, the shoes are evocative of childhood innocence, and the fragility and dependency of children. Yet, the point here was not that Alan Kurdi was wearing shoes (why wouldn't a Syrian child wear them?) but, rather, that he was wearing shoes (and clothes) like those worn by children in the west. It provided a point of visual similarity between a Syrian child and 'our' children, and a source of identification.

This kind of identification seems unproblematic at first. Recent work on altruism and social identity has shown that people are more likely to help those who resemble them in terms of some socially relevant, or salient criterion (e.g. Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). This might include a mundane point of similarity, such as someone's clothing, which acts as an external marker of cultural affiliation. However, in the context of the history of humanitarianism, the importance attributed to identification has a troubling legacy. For over a century, campaigners seeking to 'bring home' the suffering of distant peoples have known that, to inspire sympathy, they must make non-Europeans look more 'European'. In the 1920s, humanitarian campaigners went as far as to lighten the skin of Armenian children to inspire compassion among western audiences (see Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015). Such extreme practices are uncommon today, but the fact remains that issues of racial and cultural similarity and difference still inform the choice of subject of humanitarian photography and the reading of images (ibid.). Humanitarian campaigners will choose humanitarian causes, and images to represent them, according to these parameters, and draw attention to issues and features that they believe will promote identification, and, by extension, enhance empathy.

This of course does not mean that people reacted emotionally to images of Alan Kurdi's body simply *because* he resembled a child of European descent, or that they would not have done so if he was black or had been wearing attire that explicitly marked him as culturally different. Nor does the analysis of the images, their symbolism and ideological message, imply that their capacity to elicit an emotional or political response, lies exclusively, and inexorably, in their visual, or aesthetic qualities. Rather, the point being made is that that the practice of spectatorial sympathy has a political and

ideological dimension which is reflected not just in how we make sense of images of suffering or how we feel about them, but also in which dead bodies we get to gaze at, get 'shocked' by, and care about in the first place.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the responses to the images of Alan Kurdi as a manifestation of *spectatorial sympathy*, a practice that shapes the prevailing cultural assumptions about the link between images, emotion and political mobilisation, and determines the parameters within which the appropriateness of emotional and political responses to images of suffering is negotiated. Being shocked, disturbed or saddened by the photograph of a suffering body is not a visceral *reaction* to a tragic event or its technologically mediated representation, but a form of social *action*. It is a way of suffusing the photograph with moral and political significance, redefining the death represented in it as an emergency that demands urgent, collective, response, and accounting for the act of looking.

Spectatorial sympathy, which informed the social life of the Kurdi images, from the moment they were taken on the beach in Bodrum, to when they were displayed on millions of computer screens and on front covers of newspapers around the world, is inherently multimodal. It is constituted not just through avowals of emotions (both verbal and embodied), and the debates about their meaning and appositeness, but also through images themselves. The inherent link between what is *seen* and what is *felt* suggests that in studies of discourse, visual images, and their symbolism deserve to be recognised as an object of analysis, and not, as is often the case, a prop used to stimulate talk. Focusing simply on what participants *say* about an image leads us to miss the complex dynamic by which that image became visible to them, and instituted as something worth talking about.

Acknowledging the fact that the visual is an intrinsic part of everyday social and emotional life, does not require a break with discursive psychology's broader intellectual project. Especially in the early stages, discursive approaches were defined by intellectual open-mindedness and eclecticism that was (and still is) missing from mainstream psychology. The argument was frequently made that scholarship (Billig, 1988, Gill, 1996) is as important as a specific method of analysis, especially when it comes to the study of ideology. As Billig (1988, p.199-200) put it, in the study of ideological phenomena, using 'intellectual experience', 'scholarly judgment', 'hunches' and 'specialist knowledge' to place specific patterns of thought within longer traditions of explanation, and one might add, ways of seeing, is often more illuminating than following 'formally defined procedures'. There is no reason these skills cannot be productively mobilised to explore more fully the interplay between verbal and visual rhetoric, especially in terms of how images come to serve 'as the index of an ideological theme' (Hall, 1981, p.238). Given that contemporary political and media cultures are becoming increasingly reliant on both visual communication and emotion, perhaps it is time to challenge the 'hegemony of verbal texts' (Helmers & Hill, 2004, p.19-20) and consider how words and images work together in shaping human experience, and how they inform what we see and feel, and perhaps more importantly, what we don't see and don't feel.

References

Arendt, H. (1963). *On Revolution*. New York: Viking Press.

Asch, S. (2005). 'The Barnardo's babies: Performativity, shame and the photograph', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4: 507–521

Azoulay, A. (2008). *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books.

Barbauld, A.L. (1773/1825). On Romances: An Imitation (1773), in L. Aikin (ed), *Works of Barbauld*, pp. 171-175. London: Longman Hurst.

Barthes, R. (2000). *Camera Lucida.* London: vintage.

Barthes, R. (2009). *Mythologies*. London: Vintage

Berger, J. (2013). *Understanding a Photograph*. London: Penguin.

Billig, M. (1988). Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation. In C. Antaki (Ed.), *Analysing Everyday Explanation: A Casebook of Methods*, pp. 199-215. London: Sage.

Billig, M. (1991). *Ideology and opinions*. London: Sage.

Butler, J. (2007). Torture and the ethics of photography. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25: 951 – 966.

Childs, C. & Hepburn, A. (2015). Discoursive psychology and emotion. In C. Tileaga and E. Stokoe (Eds), *Discursive Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, pp. 114-128. London: Routledge.

D'Orazio, F. (2015). Journey of an image: From a beach in Bodrum to twenty million screens across the world. In O. Goriunova and F. Vis (Eds), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, p. 11- 18. Visual Social Media Lab, University of Sheffield, available online at http://visualsocialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media [accessed 5 June 2018]

Dwyer, J. (1987). *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland.* Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers.

Edwards, D. (1997). *Discourse and Cognition*. London: Sage.

Edwards, D. (1999). Emotion discourse. *Psychology and Culture*, 5: 271-91.

Edwards, D. & Middleton, D. (1988). Conversational remembering and family relationships: How children learn to remember. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 5 (1), 3-25.

Eisenman, S.F. (2007). *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. London: Reaktion Books.

European Journalism Observatory (2015). Research: How Europe's Newspapers Reported The Migration Crisis, EJO, available online at http://en.ejo.ch/research/research-how-europes-newspapers-reported-the-migration-crisis [accessed 5 June 2018]

Fahey, J. (2015). The Guardian's decision to publish shocking photos of Aylan Kurdi, The Guardian, September 7, 2015. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/07/guardian-decision-to-publish-shocking-photos-of-aylan-kurdi [accessed 5 June 2018]

Fahmy, S. (2005). US photojournalists' and photo editors' attitudes and perceptions: Visual coverage of the 9/11 and the Afgan War. *Visual Communication Quarterly*. Volume 12, Summer/Fall: 146-163.

Fehrenbach, H. & Rodogno, D. (2015) "A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child": Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective. International Review of the Red Cross, 97(900), pp. 1121–1155.

Fiering, N.S. (1976). Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 37, No. 2: 195-218.

Friedland, P. (2012). *Seeing Justice Done: The Age of Spectacular Capital Punishment in France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frith, H., Riley, S., Archer, L. & Gleeson, K. (2005). Imag(in)ing visual methodologies [Editorial], Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2(3), 187-198.

Gill, R. (1996). Discourse analysis: practical implementation. *Handbook of qualitative research methods for psychology and the social sciences*, pp. 141-158. Leicester: British Psychological Society Books.

Goldberg, V. (1991). *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*. New York: Abbeville Press.

Goriunova, O & Vis F. (2015), The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi. Visual Social Media Lab, University of Sheffield. available online at http://visualsocialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media [accessed 5 June 2018]

Hall, S. (1973). The determination of news photographs. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds), *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance and the Mass Media*, pp. 226-247. London: Sage.

Halttunen, K. (1995). Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture. *The American Historical Review*, 100, 2: 303-334.

Harré, R. (1987). *The Social Construction of Emotions*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Harré, R. & Gillett, G (1994). *The Discursive Mind*. London: Sage.

Henley, J. (2015). 'Bild's stance over Alan Kurdi image a typically bold move' *Guardian,* 9 September, 2015, available online at https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/09/bilds-stance-over-alan-kurdi-images-a-typically-bold-move [accessed 5 June 2018]

Helmers, M. & Hill, C.A. (2004). Introduction. In C.A. Hill & M. Helmers (Eds), Defining Visual Rhetorics, pp. 10-23. Mahwah, NJ: LEA Publishers.

Hepburn, A. (2004). Crying: Notes on description, transcription and interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 37: 251-90.

Kear, A. & Steinberg, D.L. (1999). *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Levine, M., Prosser, A., Evans, D., & Reicher, S. (2005). Identity and emergency intervention: How social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shapes helping behaviour. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 443–453.

Mackey, R. (2015). 'Brutal images of syrian boy drowned off turkey must be seen, activists say', *The New York Times*, September 2, available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/03/world/middleeast/brutal-images-of-syrian-boy-drowned-off-turkey-must-be-seen-activists-say.html [accessed 5 June 2018]

Mitchell, W.J.T. (1994). Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Potter, J. (2012). Discourse analysis and discursive psychology. In Cooper, H. (Editor-in-Chief). APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological (pp. 111-130). Washington: American Psychological Association Press.

Rajan, A. (2015). Letter from the editor: If you were shocked by Aylan Kurdi's picture, we did our job. *The Independent*, September 5, available online at http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/letter-from-the-editor-if-you-were-shocked-by-aylan-kurdis-picture-we-did-our-job-10488122.html [accessed 5 June 2018]

Reavey, P. & Johnson, K. (2008). *Visual methods in psychology: Using and interpreting images in qualitative research*. London: Routledge.

Rozario, K. (2003). "Delicious Horrors": Mass Culture, the Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3: 417-455.

Sarinana, J. (2014). Photography and the Feelings of Others: From Mirroring Emotions to the Theory of Mind. Petapixel.som, available at http://petapixel.com/2014/10/25/photography-feelings-others-mirroring-emotions-theory-mind/ [accessed 5 June 2018]

Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. London: Penguin.

Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin.

Tharoor, I. (2015). 'A dead baby becomes the most tragic symbol yet of the Mediterranean refugee crisis', *Washington Post,* September 2, available online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/02/a-dead-baby-becomes-the-most-tragic-symbol-yet-of-the-mediterranean-refugee-crisis/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.47601eac93f4 [accessed 5 June 2018]

Tooth, R. (2014). Graphic content: when photographs of carnage are too upsetting to publish *Guardian,* July 23, available online at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/23/graphic-content-photographs-too-upsetting-to-publish-gaza-mh17-ukraine [accessed 5 June 2018]

Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and poststructuralism in dialogue', *Discourse and Society*, 9(3):431–56.

Wetherell, M. (2007). A step too far: Discursive psychology, linguistic ethnography and questions of identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11(5): 661–68.

Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and Emotion: A new social science understanding*. London: Sage.

Wright, H.C. (1846). *Defensive War Proved to Be a Denial of Christianity and of the Government of God: With Illustrative Facts and Anecdotes*. London: Charles Gilpin.

Zelizer, B. (2004) When war is reduced to a photograph. In S. Allan & B. Zelizer (2004). *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, pp. 115-135. London: Routledge.