

Mediterranean

From Turkey to Morocco and Beyond



n Commotions

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The power of images cannot be overstated. They are also fragile items, prone to instrumentalisation by authoritarian regimes, who use them to depict political reductionism for the dissemination of hate and fear. In the midst of the contemporary deluge of images, interpretative caution is always necessary. However, sometimes photographs can tell poignant stories – stories so piercing that they make harsh struggles and cruel events visible, in ways that shatter social consciousness and can thus be used as tools against dehumanizing forms of politics.

On 2 September 2015, one such event occurred on the beaches of Bodrum, in Turkey. Dead bodies of two children were washed up by the waves. They were brothers – Alan and Galip Kurdi – from Kobane, Syria. Both of them, along with their mother Rehana whose body was yet to be found, had drowned in the Mediterranean when the dinghy in which they were attempting to reach Greece capsized shortly after leaving land. Their names could be made public immediately because their father survived the accident and was able to describe the details of their plight. The Kurdi family was fleeing the Syrian catastrophe, itself an aftermath of the Iraqi invasion by the Western allies a decade prior, which led to the rise of ISIS and to a convoluted proxy war of inhumane proportions.

The bodies were found early in the morning and they reached international headlines that same day in the form of pictures taken by photojournalist Nilüfer Demir. Demir captured different elements and victims, documenting even the moment in which Turkish crime investigation agents carried the bodies away from the shore. Of all the images, those focusing on Alan's fragile body, his outfit and posture, produced a powerful aesthetic effect that would trigger a cascade of social media replications, as well as causing global outrage.

Political intensities, humanitarian ends

As soon as it hit social media, one of the images of Alan became instantly iconic. Barely one day after the incident, French President François Hollande called Turkish President Erdoğan specifically referring to the photo, promising to coordinate a more fair and humane European



response to the Syrian conflict. Both British Prime Minister David Cameron and Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny commented on the photograph, each weighing on its implications as a “human catastrophe”. The discussion even reached the Canadian federal election process, since it became known that the Kurdi family was heading towards Vancouver. Activists and grassroots

organizations in Western countries mobilized to denounce the magnitude of the events, and in many cases urged the authorities to facilitate an easing of migration procedures. Demir's images of Alan became a gamechanger. Nevertheless, a new debate exploded on social media, this time questioning the image of Alan being used in a sensationalist news cycle – bringing nothing at all to the deceased toddler. Some media outlets opted to stop using the



images, while others decided to blur or cover Alan's body and show only the surrounding actions. The concerns were legitimate, but was this solution useful? After all, images and visual communication channels are a powerful means of conveying an understanding of a humanitarian crisis. A photograph usually goes unchallenged in its ability to represent a specific reality. Some

realities are so distressing that speculative discussions about their representational intent do little to help the situation on the ground. In view of this, the concept of "humanitarian photojournalism" joined the conversation.

"Humanitarian photography" became an attempt to reconcile the legitimate suspicion that lingers over media outlets competing for ratings by appealing to all sorts of affective ruses, and the potential effect of images to influence public opinion – in some cases even changing the course of a conflict. The term is to be understood as "the mobilisation of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across state boundaries".¹ Demir's images of Alan can be considered as humanitarian – and not exploitative or simply illustrative – because of the explicit intention behind their publication. She was often interviewed and her intention was always clear:

*"I wish I hadn't had to take that picture... What I saw has left a terrible impression that keeps me awake at night. Then again, I am happy that the world finally cares and is mourning the dead children. I hope that my picture can contribute to changing the way we look at immigration in Europe, and that no more people have to die on their way out of a war."*²

Demir's images became exemplary due to the stark situation they depicted and the political mobilization they were able to trigger. This is a delicate balance, since images are never neutral. Indeed, the critical discussion around them orients their meaning; otherwise, they might lead to misconceptions and conflicting beliefs. At the same time, not telling the stories behind them would be disastrous for the refugees fleeing from terror. In this vein, Maria Mattus wrote:

*"In Kurdi's case, the photographs disclosed how innocent children suffer and die between two separate worlds – between warfare and welfare. Demir's images bore witness to a horrible reality, and led media to upgrade the ongoing 'migrant situation' to a 'refugee crisis'."*³

Moreover, Demir's work on site was extremely cautious: she produced a substantial set of photographs, many of which escape the gruesomeness and depict instead even-tempered scenes where the facts are evident, yet remain sensitive towards the victim. In the end, Demir's images show an ethical commitment and they remind us stirringly of an ongoing cataclysm. They haunt us. As Susan Sontag suggests:

*"Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget."*⁴

Iconic drifts, Moroccan performance

Different artists and activists sensed that there was something powerful in Alan's images, and they chose to come to grips with it. Rather than reposting or reprinting the photographs (as we also refrain from doing here), the well-known artist Sudarsan Pattnaik made a sand sculpture of Alan's shape in eastern India; the celebrated artist Ai Weiwei recreated Alan's lifeless pose in a black and white picture; graffiti artists Justus Becker and Oğuz Şen painted a huge mural of it on the river shore in Frankfurt, in Germany. Of all these actions, probably one of the most enduring was organized by performance artist Latifa Ahrar on a beach near Rabat, in Morocco.

Rather than a mimetic intervention, Ahrar's performance became a minimal feat of creative wit. She convened a group of 30 people and together they lay down on the beach, dressed up in Alan's distinctive clothing – a red T-shirt and denim shorts – adopting Alan's estranged and fragile body position. The action was organized in conjunction with other journalists, securing a communicational strategy. Ahrar wanted to remind us of the perfidious European policies that turn that sea into a marine graveyard.

Ahrar's performance was unique in a specific sense. It was based on a minimal gesture that worked through empathic means, and aimed at transmitting a vulnerability that can only be felt on a bodily level, beneath the skin. In that sense, the action implied an appropriation of a bodily posture, of its fragility, which accounts to a mobilisation of the sensible to stir a critical reflection through visceral motifs. The resulting pictures of the performance lend themselves to reinforcement and substitution, by pointing to an ominous known referent. Instead of reproducing an image, Ahrar and her collaborators personified its subtle distress, multiplying it relentlessly with their own bodies.

Based equally on empathy and on outrage over a given state of affairs, Ahrar's performance enabled the recirculation of a fragile gesture, turning it into a counter-strategy against an authoritarian border regime. The action denounced the reality of a disastrous migration policy and its ongoing lethal effects. Re-enacting a tragedy through a collective performance of resistance, Ahrar's work contributed to an iconography of international efforts underlining a common struggle, while organizing a form of solidarity that expanded beyond the rational: an emotional act of dissent.

Illustrations

- p. 266: Graffiti art by Justus Becker and Oğuz Şen, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Photograph by Frank C. Müller, CC.
- p. 268: Sudarsan Pattnaik's sculpture, Puri beach near Bhubaneswar, India.
- p. 271: Twitter Screenshot. Performance, Latifa Ahrar.

Endnotes

- 1 Maria Mattus, "Too dead? Image analyses of humanitarian photos of the Kurdi brothers.", *Visual Studies*, Vol. 35, 2020.
- 2 Ismail Küpeli, "We Spoke to the Photographer Behind the Picture of the Drowned Syrian Boy", *Vice*, 4 September 2015.
- 3 Mattus, "Too dead?", p. 2.
- 4 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador: New York, 2003, p. 89.



Aylan Kurdi's death recreated by 30 people dressed as Syrian boy on Moroccan beach [mirror.co.uk/news/world-new...](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/)



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