IN THE NAME OF POLITICS?

The First Things First Manifesto was first written and published in 1963 by Ken Garland and 20 other designers. In 1999, the *Adbusters* magazine introduced an updated version of the manifesto, signed by 33 designers across the world. In a capitalist society of consumerism, this manifesto aims to re-evaluate our priorities as designers and calls us to shift our practice to more meaningful purposes: to respond to environmental, cultural, societal and political issues (Eyemagazine.com, 2019). Since I came across this manifesto last year, I have been questioning the responsibilities we hold as future designers. Using visual communication as a tool to shape and change narratives has been my centre of focus during the past few months. The refugee crisis, the biggest migration movement since World War 2, has been at the centre of Europe's concern over the last few years. Following this wave of mass migration, we witness a rise of the far-right shown through the reinforcement of border controls. A flow of images, mainly depicting great numbers of refugees living in inhumane conditions, circulate constantly on social media, from twitter to newspapers. In today's digital world, where images come before words, how do they shape the narrative of the refugee crisis? To explore this topic in more depth, I have chosen to analyse Nilüfer Demir's photograph of Alan Kurdi (2015). The photograph depicts the body of the 3-year-old Syrian child, lying face down on the beach of Bodrum Peninsula, in Turkey. This photograph made the headlines of newspapers on a global scale as it aroused outrage and public concern on Syria's war and the crisis. Does photography of humanitarian crises have the power to enact political change? More precisely, is Alan Kurdi's death enough to make us act? The following analysis aims to answer this question by highlighting the reasons for the photograph's global impact, exploring the limits of its impact to then suggest a deeper questioning on the relationship between photography and politics.

Context and description of photograph

On the 2nd of September 2015, a small inflatable boat, transporting sixteen refugees from Syria and Iraq attempting to reach Greece, capsized shortly after their departure from the Bodrum shore in Turkey. Alan Kurdi drowned, along with his brother Galip and his mother Rihanna (Withnall, 2015). At the scene, the Turkey-based photojournalist and photographer Nilüfer Demir took a series of photographs of Alan Kurdi's body. Amongst many other, there were three main images that stood out in the media. I will choose to focus on the one I saw for the first time on the news. The image is a close up of Alan's body, lying face down slightly tilted on the side. His body dominates the image and is orientated towards the ocean, the water coming up to touch the top of his head. The child is wearing a red t-shirt, navy shorts, and black sneakers.

A global impact: the power of the photograph

The power of the image of Alan Kurdi's death lies beneath the power of compassion. The word compassion bares its origins from latin, *com* meaning "with, together", and *pati*, "to suffer" (Oed.com, 2019). In that sense, to feel compassion is to share the suffering of another individual. The photograph makes us feel compassion as it depicts the reality of Alan Kurdi's suffering: by looking at the photograph, we share his suffering. The compassion that is felt is made possible because the photograph represents the suffering of a single individual. This correlation between compassion and the number of individuals, has been analysed by psychology professor Paul Slovic, in *Psychic Numbing and Genocide*. The study describes that our capacity to feel compassion lessens when faced to large numbers. "Our cognitive and perceptual systems seem to be designed to sensitize us to small changes in our environment, possibly at the expense of making us less able to detect and respond to large changes" (Slovic,2007). Slovic's study is also supported in Hannah Arendt's insight on compassion in her book *On Revolution*. In her conceptual analysis, she states that "Its [compassion] strength hinges on the strength of passion itself, which, in contrast to reason, can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization" (Arendt,1963). When applying these principles and analyses to Alan Kurdi's photograph, it is clear that it is a photograph that calls for compassion. It stands out from the mainstream images of refugees we are facing everyday: a mass of unidentifiable people, often in terrible conditions, traveling somewhere or behind barbed wires waiting to enter a country, away from their homes. It is also important to note that Alan Kurdi's face cannot be identified on the photograph, as he is lying face down on the sand. The unidentified child could be any parents' son.

The effectiveness of the representation of a child in an image of a humanitarian crisis can be explained through semiotics. Semiotics is the "study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation" (Oxford Dictionnaries English, 2019). According to Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founders of semiotics, a sign is constructed by two elements: the signifier - an object - and the signified - the ideas or concepts that lie beneath that object (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Here, the signifier is the child. One of the signifiers of the child is innocence, therefore, the child can be perceived as a sign of innocence. As the Anthropologist Miriam Ticktin states, "children are usually the face of humanitarianism; they are represented as innocent victims of famine, war, or natural disaster" (Ticktin, 2015). In the media, this "iconic" photograph has been compared to other iconic photographs of young victims of humanitarian crises (J. Secor, 2018). Nick Ut's 1973 photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phúc, also known as the Napalm Girl, running away from aerial attacks, Kevin Carter's photograph of a starving child in Sudan, being watched by a vulture in 1993, and today it reminds me of Mahmoud Raslan's photos of Oman Daqneesh, better known as the "Aleppo boy", were taken a year after Alan Kurdi's photograph. Images of humanitarian crises have a great affect when the subject is a child, they arrest any viewer: they hit us and scream "an innocent child is suffering, or is dead, from crises we have failed to act upon."

The emotions felt when looking at this photograph were then translated into action. Within 12 hours, the photos of Alan's corpse washed on the shore took over 20 million screens, and was subject to 53,000 tweets per hour (Press Association, 2015). The photograph sparked outrage and governments were pressured to act. Several European leaders mourned the death of Alan Kurdi in the press. In the UK, an online petition was created to pressure the ex-Prime Minister David Cameron to accept more asylum seekers and was signed by more than 100,000 signatures (Tharoor, 2015). The ex-French Prime minister expressed his mourning in a tweet: "Urgent action required — a Europe-wide mobilization is urgent," (The Washington Post, 2015). On an international scale, donations to migrant and refugee organisations spiked (J. Secor, 2018).

The compassion and the shock that we all felt when looking at Alan Kurdi's corpse triggered actions for change. But to what extent? Did this photograph lead to true political change?

Compassion: a drive for political action?

The limits of the power of Alan Kurdi's photograph coincides with the limits of compassion. I remember the day I saw Alan Kurdi for the first time. When I turned on my TV that day, the news reporter had just announced the new headline: *3-year-old boy refugee found dead on Turkey beach*. And there it was, Alan's body exhibited on my screen. It was the first time I had witnessed crude death. Like most, the feelings of anger and compassion aroused by the photographs did not ensue further action. Various theories put forward the reasons behind our incapacity to act. One theory is that, in a world dominated by images, our constant exposure to them make us immune to the suffering of others, as there is only so much pain we can take. Referring to this theory, Barbie Zelizer uses the term 'compassion fatigue': "we become incapable of responding, either with moral outrage or with purposeful intervention" (A.Crane, 2008). Zelizer even doubts that photographs still have the power to make us feel. In her recent essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag offers another perspective. She acknowledges the emotional power of photography; however, she questions its capacity of making us understand the problem further. She doubts that photographs are as powerful as narratives: "harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us." (Sontag, 2003). She fears that the emotional charge of the photograph prevents us from understanding and to some extent remembering the causes that made the photograph possible in the first place. As a result, the photograph's power is limited: it only goes so far as to making us feel, and in this sense, it is unable to make us act; powerless in the face of unachievable actions. This shift away from compassion, is the essence of its limits.

One could argue that this does not apply to Alan Kurdi's photograph, as action had been taken shortly after it was circulated. In his essay 'Photographs of Agony' in *About*

Looking, John Berger suggests our actions come from our desire to ease the frustration of our inability to act when faced with such images: “But the reader who has been arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy. And as soon as this happens, his sense of shock is dispersed: his own moral inadequacy may shock him as much as the crimes being committed in the war. Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing some kind of penance - of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or to UNICEF” (Berger, 1980). Sontag and Berger’s insights agree: photography fails to translate our feelings into meaningful action, because initially we have not looked at the root of the problem. In this case, the causes of the Syrian War. Therefore, one could argue that the actions taken in response to Alan Kurdi’s photograph were not meaningful – they were merely actions to ease our frustration. In response to his death, governments only took short-term political actions.

However, if compassion has limits, why do we expect images of compassion to be the drive for political change? Are we not also responsible for not being able to look beyond the image?

Modern image consumerism

Alan Kurdi’s photograph was used to achieve political change. After having analysed the limits of compassion, one needs to question our desire to embed politics in images of compassion. In *‘The arithmetic of compassion’: Re-thinking the politics of photography*, James Johnson points out that Sontag and Berger’s focus is on the capability of an image of compassion to put forward solutions that need to be taken in order to alleviate the pain from the suffering (Johnson, 2011). Johnson asks why do we expect images of compassion to give us a humanitarian answer. We have seen that compassion has limits, therefore why expect images of compassion to make us act politically? He reinforces his argument by sharing Arendt’s insight: “On Arendt's view, those who would ground the politics of photography in images to arouse compassion in viewers face a debilitating dilemma. If induce compassion for individual suffering, their work cannot help but disarming” (Johnson, 2011). If we accept that compassion fails to make us act, then we have to accept that images of compassion are “politically self-defeating” (Johnson, 2011).

Johnson’s suggestion that we should focus on our assumption that compassion should fuel political action is relevant when looking at the way in which Alan Kurdi’s image traveled on a global scale. Prior to the publishing of the photograph, it had been subject to multiple debates within newspaper agencies (Laurent, 2015). To publish the photograph was to cross important ethical boundaries including the dignity of Alan Kurdi and the respect for his family. However, because it had already gone viral on social media, and because they believed that it would lead to political action, more than 40 newspapers worldwide decided to publish it regardless (Laurent, 2015). His death was reported around the world, on millions of screens

and newspaper covers, and in the end, no substantial political action was taken. It also raises a worrying issue: if newspaper companies found the courage to publish this photograph, then they will be less reluctant to publish the next ones that come. If there is such a thing as "compassion fatigue", what if one day we become immune to photographs of dead children?

The fact that people were able to share a photograph of a child's corpse so rapidly on social media highlights our relationship with images today. In a society driven by consumption, we consume images like we consume every other object in our lives: without conscious sensibility. We have ceased to take the time to question and analyse an image before using it. Who is photographed? What is the context of the photograph? What is the cause of the event photographed? What is the impact the photograph? And the list goes on. Such questions are essential when looking at images of the dead and the suffering. Understanding an image and what it represents is the least we can do. We owe it to the victims. The modern European History professor, Susan A. Crane, urges us to do so: "With photographs, what we see may be all we get, but that should not stop us from inquiring further, and as scholars we are in fact obligated to persist" (A. Crane, 2008). One could argue that with so many images flashing before our eyes, to analyse each one of them would be absurd. However, if we did apply the correct behaviour when dealing with images like Alan Kurdi's in the first place, then we could consider the possibility that there would be less of them. Berger and Sontag have demonstrated that we are unable to look beyond the image and take meaningful action. However, I do believe that photographers, as well as the viewers, hold a responsibility when it comes to capturing, looking and using images of the victims of war. Photographers should shift their methods away from the use of disturbing images to evoke compassion in the name of politics. As for viewers, I also believe that we have the power to look beyond the image if we educate ourselves to do so. I decided not to insert Alan Kurdi's photograph, or any other photograph that was mentioned in this essay, as they have been over used. If I can spare some of Alan's dignity, then the right decision would be not to share it.

In conclusion, the photograph of Alan Kurdi's death is powerful, both in its content and its emotional impact on the viewers. This power is limited by the boundaries of the compassion it evokes, as it fails to make us take meaningful actions and to understand the root of the refugee crisis. The limits of compassion have pushed us to question our desire to use such images in order to ensue political changes. The circulation of Alan Kurdi's photograph is merely the tip of the 'modern day image consumerism' iceberg.

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    Note: Source at the start of my research. It gave me all the ideas and concepts I needed to look for further references. Key source on how we look at images of the suffering

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15. Johnson, J. (2011). 'The Arithmetic of Compassion': Rethinking the Politics of Photography. *British Journal of Political Science*, 41(3), p.632,634,635.
    Note: A deep analysis of the feeling of compassion. Johnson regroups Sontag, Berger, Arendt, and other theorists to compare and contrast them.

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