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s2102498

Word count: 2153

The impact of constructed images of refugees on policies and political discourses: the case of Alan Kurdi's death

Over one million migrants arrived in Europe through Spain, Greece, and Italy in 2015. A number four times bigger than the year before (BBC). More than one million people applied for asylum in 2015, twice as many as the earlier period (Connor, 2016). This sudden increase was dubbed in Europe as the 'Refugee Crisis'. The event set media and political agendas throughout 2015 (Radu, 2016). Immediately, competing discourses of humanization and securitization arose on the public sphere. Especially after September of 2015. It was a transformative moment for the crisis's treatment in media and for political discourses (de-Andrés, Nos-Aldás & García-Matilla, 2016). The influx of refugees arriving across the Mediterranean soared from 50,000 in June to 160,000 in September (UNHCR). By that time of the year, more than 260,000 people had died en route to Europe (Safdar, 2016). However, the image of the death of one single boy, Alan Kurdi, would become an icon of the refugee crisis. Following Gursel's theory of formative fictions (2016), this essay will study how constructed images have impacted European policy-making regarding refugees using the case of Alan Kurdi's iconic photography. This paper will conclude that Alan Kurdi's image was a shift from the traditional refugee representation. Thus, it challenged 'cultural threat' and securitization discourses and enhanced humanitarian discourses. However, it was not a total breakaway and succumbed to decontextualization and depoliticization processes.

Gursel's formative fictions thesis (2016) is central to this essay's analysis. The concept challenges the idea of the objectivity of photography –understood as "representations of reality" (11) – not only focusing on the framing and the professional taking the picture. But also focusing on what she calls 'structures of representation'. This implies that a more holistic process is involved in constructing "cultural texts that shape journalists' and news consumers' own points of view" (12). That is to say, not only the photographer but also the image broker that distribute the imagery or the journalists that insert the picture into newspapers or websites. Gursel understands that these constructed images affect "how viewers imagine certain categories of people" (21).

Before analysing individually Alan Kurdi's photography's mediatisation and impact, this paper will review the published literature on the visual representation of refugees in European and

Australian newspapers and online media before and during the 'refugee crisis'. First, migrants are usually represented as big groups of people through what is called 'mass exodus' photography (Blaiker et al 2013; Jovičić 2017; Konstantinidou & Michailidou 2014; Langdon 2018; Wilmott 2017; Wright 2014). To be sure, Blaiker et al (2013) analysed Australian newspaper front pages and they determined that only 2% of the images presented "remarkably visual [facial] features" (413). According to Wilmott (2017), there is rarely eye contact between the photographer and the refugee. This strips individuality away from migrants. These grouping representations, according to Wright (2014), constructs refugees as bare life ¬—what Agamben (2000) refers as zoē, the mere biological "fact of living common to all living beings" (4), animals or humans. The second most prominent aspect of refugee imagery in media is the over-representation of men (Blaiker et al 2013; Jovičić 2017; Konstantinidou & Michailidou 2014; Langdon 2018; Wilmott 2017; Wright 2014). This, coupled with the first feature, constructs homogenised, racialised and gendered groups that are different from the European self (Konstantinidou & Michailidou 2014). Thirdly, refugees are usually depicted around environments that emphasize crossing borders or prison-like symbolism; such as wire fences, rural areas, train stations, shores or refugee camps (Blaiker et al 2013; Jovičić 2017). Moreover, refugees are commonly depicted accompanied by police and in situations in which the image focuses more often on the police itself (Wilmott 2017). This criminalizes them. Lastly, there are some analyses that point out the Christian iconographic tradition used in refugee images. Wright (2002) explains that the repetitive use of the 'Madonna and Child' image becomes less appealing for humanitarian discourses the more it is exploited. However, Jovičić (2017) points out a new framing: the 'hero father frame', in which men are depicted carrying their kids amid chaos. Nevertheless, Wilmott (2017) argues that even these photos are not presented with the personal information of the pictured (78). Therefore, it does not contribute to the contextualization of the individual and the causes that pushed them to become refugees.

In this paragraph, we will see how these constructed representations of refugees have fostered or hindered certain competing discourses. As Gursel's concept of formative fictions tells us, these constructed realities affect how audiences imagine certain groups of people. This is partially related to Said's Orientalism thesis. The 'West' constructs an essentialized image of the 'non-Western other' as barbaric, lacking moral, unruly. Whereas the 'West' is imagined as superior (Said 1979). This fits into the big-size representations of refugees, stripped off of their individuality (Wright 2014). This racialized, essentialized representation of migrants cultivates what some have called 'cultural threat' discourses. For example, the Belgian politician Theo Francken proposed a law that instigated asylum seekers to integrate themselves as well as their

children and to participate in Belgian society. Failure in doing so would revoke the asylum-seeking process. The draft legislation did not pass. But it is an example of how 'cultural threat' discourses draw from Orientalist notions of the 'uncivilized other' (De Cleen et al 2017). However, Said also describes the construction of the 'West' as masculine and active, whereas the 'other' is presented as feminine and passive. The refugee imagery shows us that men are over-represented in the imagery and also in the political discourse. As the US president Donald Trump stated in November 2015: "You look at the migration, it's young, strong men" (Wilmott 2017, 78). In this case, it is needed to apply Yuval-Davis's ideas on the nation and gender. Yuval-Davis (1996) explains that women reproduce "biologically, culturally and symbolically" the national and ethnic identities (17). The nation is imagined as a woman guarded by son-soldiers (Elshtain 1995) and as a virgin-land raped by male aggressors (McClintock 1995). As we will see, this 'gendered nationalism' see groups of male foreigners as a threat, fostering securitization discourses. As well, the under-representation of women and children in media hinders the 'deservingness discourse'. Women and children are seen as more legitimate asylum-seekers whereas young men are imagined more as rational-choice actors, therefore, not as refugees but as economic migrants (Vollmer & Karakayali 2018, 120). These facts hinder humanitarian discourses and feed 'economic threat' discourses that describe refugees as 'bogus' welfare-seeking migrants that might undermine the socio-economic status of the host country's citizens (De Cleen et al 2017). Lastly, Said's theory is an attempt to explain how the production of knowledge justified 20th-century imperial intervention. Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris (2016) opt for a new form of Orientalism to explain Western responses to the refugee's influx. One that draws from these old-fashion notions of barbaric, unruly 'non-western other' to form a perception of a "continuously troubled East" (7). This image is fuelled by the analysed refugee imagery. Especially by the repetitive use of environments emphasizing borders and bare life. This "frequently objectifies them, dismissing their historical, cultural and political circumstances" (Wright 2002, 64). This decontextualization coupled with the 'continuously troubled East' image neglects 'responsibility' discourses from Western countries. These discourses had the potential to look into the historical or economic circumstances that produced the events that eventually might have led to mass mobilizations of people to Europe. However, Neo-Orientalism "conceal[s] the foundations of inequality and dependency, and legitimize[s] discourses of TINA [there is no alternative]" (Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris 2016, 10).

On the 2nd of September of 2015, the corpse of a three-year-old Syrian boy is photographed lying face down washed ashore at a beach closed to the Turkish city of Bodrum. Quickly, the picture became a global icon representing the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. As

de-Andrés, Nos-Aldás & García-Matilla (2016) show, after the spread of Alan's image the headlines about Syria or refugees experienced a four-fold increased.

Alan's picture had an impact on the competing discourses surrounding the refugee crisis in the 'West'. Most remarkably, and because Alan's family's goal was to reach Canada, It became a prime issue in the North American country's federal elections campaign in 2015 (Messamore 2016; Nimijean 2017). The liberal candidate Justin Trudeau exploited an image of 'compassionate Canadians' (Hadfield, 2017). Especially after September 2, when he reiterated his intentions to accept 25,000 refugees by the end of 2015. The liberals won the federal elections for the first time in nine years. Even though none of the authors immediately link these results to Alan Kurdi's image, all of them acknowledge the centrality of the 'refugee crisis' during the campaign. In Europe, the day after the picture, the British Prime Minister David Cameron declared himself "deeply moved by the sight of that young boy" and, as a response to public pressure, he announced that the UK would welcome 20,000 refugees from Syrian camps. However, these would be "sick children, women who had been raped, and men who had suffered torture" (Mavelli 2017, 826). On the same note, Germany announced shortly after Kurdi's death that would allow 800,000 in their country in a year. This decision has been understood in terms of a national identity conditioned by the guilt of the Holocaust, own German's experiences as refugees or "a desire of Chancellor Angel Merkel to display […] humanity" (Mavelli 2017, 827). At the European Union level, the European Commission announced in July the relocation of 54,000 refugees over two years. However, the 9th of September of 2015, a few days after Alan's image, the same institution presented a plan to relocate 120,000 refugees (European Commission 2015). Many more responses were documented at the level of civic mobilizations, with more humble results across Europe (Kleres, 2018). For example, in Barcelona, 'RefugeesAidBCN', a pro-refugees grassroots organization, was launched only one day after the release of Kurdi's image (Netherland, 2016).

Why did the death of one boy have such a big impact? The photo itself breaks away from nearly every common depiction of refugees. It represented an individual in a tranquil setting, whose story was told by their alive relatives. This fomented humanitarian discourses. Plus, Kurdi is a non-accompanied child, which probably fostered 'deservingness' discourses while disarming 'securitization' discourses. Lastly, his western-style clothing and lighter skin made "white Europeans" see their own children when they looked at the photo (El-Enany 2016, 1). This was appropriately displayed by the #CouldBeMyChild hashtag. This dissolved any attempt of orientalist 'othering' or 'cultural threat' discourses to arise. As we have seen, Alan Kurdi's picture built momentum for humanitarian discourses in the context of the refugee crisis.

However, did it change politics? As Vollmer & Karakayali (2018) explain in the German case, 'securitization' discourses and questions about 'deservingness' arose soon after. Especially after the November Paris attacks or the sexual assaults in New Year's Eve by allegedly northern African men in Cologne. As Schlag (2017) exposes, these already-mentioned "emotional framing" (224), even though they cherish humanitarian discourses, they might also have depoliticizing effects. These suffering bodies are constructed as victims "without perpetrator" (Mavelli, 2017, 824). Or, if there is something to blame, usually it is criminal networks –two Syrian men were convicted of human trafficking over Alan's dead– or natural environments (824) –Alan's picture depicted by the sea reinforces this idea. Refugee imagery, as it is Alan's case, is usually depicted in rural or border-crossing environments, which decontextualizes them. This decontextualization process can lead to 'politics of pity' (Schlag, 2017). And, according to some authors, Western reactions to the death of Alan Kurdi was not much about the refugees, but more about the emotional and cultural well-being of western population (Mavelli, 2017). As Nimijean states about the Canadian case, the refugee story was more about the "return to the kinder, gentler nation that had gone missing" (Al-Solayee as cited in Nimijean, 2017, 346).

In conclusion, this essay, drawing from Gursel's formative fictions thesis, has established that photos and images are constructed in a way that affects how people imagine others. Then, it described the main characteristics of refugee imagery and how these fomented the idea of refugees as big groups of 'non-western' men stripped of any historical or political context. This fomented gendered nationalist discourses of securitization. Moreover, the essay explained how the lack of individuality hinders humanitarian representation while allowing the construction of orientalist views that fostered 'cultural-threat' discourses. At the same time, the case of Alan Kurdi's iconic picture is a nearly total juxtaposition of every recurrent feature on refugee's representations. However, its impact on humanitarian and emotional discourses could not break away from decontextualization processes. His picture does not challenge neo-orientalist notions of a 'continuously troubled East' because it does not explain the causes and reasons for his journey. Thus, it still conceals the connection between unequal West-East relations and the refugee influx. Plus, it neither offers an alternative to TINA discourses. References to Alan Kurdi's image were incorporated in existing discourses or motivated short-lived politics of pity.

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