The Drowned and the Saved

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How do refugees feature in contemporary rhetoric? In the face of suffering the only way to keep borders closed, as Europe is beginning to discover, is to turn one’s face away. The appeal constituted by the recent photograph of a drowned toddler functions as a counter to the dystopian imaginary that is increasingly being reflected in the European refugee crisis; and appeals to us to say that there might be others who can be saved.

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During the ongoing European refugee crisis, labelled the greatest migration since World War II, a social experiment was run in the comments section of the Daily Mail. It used a slice of Nazi propaganda and replaced the word ‘Jew’ with the word ‘migrant’.

Original quote, from The Pestilential Miasma of the World by Robert Ley (1914):
“In this struggle against Judah, there’s only a clear either/or. Any half measure leads to one’s own destruction. Judah and its world must die if humanity wants to live; there is no other choice than to fight a pitiless battle against the Jews in every form”. The Pestilential Miasma of the World by Robert Ley.

Daily Mail version:
This struggle against migrants is clear either/or. Any half measure leads to our own destruction. There is no other choice than to fight a pitiless battle against them in every form.

The experiment used this quote from Mein Kampf (1925-6):
If this battle is not fought to its end, then take a look at the peoples five hundred years from now. I think you will find but few images of God…

And recast it thus:
If this battle is not fought to the end, take a look at the people of England five hundred years from now. I think you will find few images of God.

Medium summarized its findings on 10 August 2015:
At the most recent count, we had a total of 480 up votes (and rising) against 16 down votes, across eight adapted Nazi comments. It seems the migration debate has evolved to a place where even certified hate speech can pass for popular political opinion. ([https://medium.com/@bestofthemail/i-was-upvoted-for-posting-nazi-propaganda-about-migrants-in-the-daily-mail-8996899810b4](https://medium.com/@bestofthemail/i-was-upvoted-for-posting-nazi-propaganda-about-migrants-in-the-daily-mail-8996899810b4))

Feedback documented by the news site included comments that described the migrants as ‘insects’, a ‘swarm’, a ‘pest’ and ‘the plague’ and suggested measures as to how to exterminate the lot.

Contemporary rhetoric against refugees has uncanny echoes of hate speech from the Nazi era, and is no less frightening. (Let us remember that we see the Holocaust as pre-eminently about Jews: which is inaccurate, given that the Nazi state exterminated the differently-abled, homosexuals and gypsies as well.) But to say this is to state the obvious. What the rhetoric reveals is a style of thinking, a mode of rationalization. Extermination, as embodied by the Nazi state, was a very rationalized process—that can be termed dystopian.

Dystopia is a utopia not planned very well, or not planned justly (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2010). In a world of increasing entropy, there are more ways for planning to go wrong than right, and dystopias reflect this (2). The planned cities and economies of European nations go awry in the face of humanitarian suffering on this scale. Utopias are also characterized by enclosed spaces and sealed borders that separate utopian spaces from non-utopian ones (Jameson 2010). Europe’s developed economies guarding the borders and regulating migration are assertions of a nation state’s sovereignty, undoubtedly. Borders no longer keep people in (not in Syria) and they no longer can keep people out (European borders). Further, unless planned with the ruthless precision of the Nazi state, the closed border cannot be workable or just in the face of suffering. In the face of suffering the only way to keep borders closed, as Europe is beginning to discover, is to turn one’s face away.

Like eco- and techno-dystopias common to fiction and film, the refugee crisis is being rendered into a demographic dystopia for Europe. The dystopian imagination is driven by the fear of overpopulation (Jameson). The reference to swarms, pests suggests the fear of being overrun, by forms of life, like rapidly reproducing vermin (think of Hitler’s infamous comparison of Jews to vermin). Thus, dystopian thinking is marked by amplified fears of overpopulation by communities and ethnicities deemed undesirable to begin with and whose defining feature is precisely their ability to overpopulate. Here we may align the rhetoric of hatred noted above very close to traditional sci-fi, fantasy and dystopian cultural texts, from Mary Shelley’s 1819 *Frankenstein* to the cult *Alien* films, *Species*, *Prometheus*, etc. where it is not the fear of the monster per se but the fear of the monster breeding and replicating that haunts society.

Dystopian thinking is driven by fears that emanate from the foundational anxiety of overpopulation—that of ‘intensified sociability’ (Claeys 2013). This is an anxiety over not just enforced communalism but over the loss of individual cultural identity. Opting for
standardization and homogeneity over difference and variation, utopias pursue uniformity and conformity—speaking of ‘one’ tradition, indivisibility and unitariness.

The fear of the migrant is not simply based in the economies of receiving societies but in anxieties of cultural mixing, cross-cultural relations and presumed ‘dilution’ of racial-national identity. The fear of cultural mixing is an extended speculation about already existing trends. Cultural mixing that migrants and refugees induce is seen as contamination, and this provokes the intense dislike of the racial, ethnic and cultural Other—a dislike which Europe harnessed through its massive project, colonialism. In a sense, given the migration of the second millennium, cultures have been mixing at unprecedented rates and to unexpected degrees. Indeed, as Dirk Hoerder (2002) has demonstrated, the European Renaissance, the presumed high point of European civilization, was made possible because of Arab, Buddhist, Chinese and Asian artists, mathematicians, traders, theologians and philosophers arriving at, staying on in, or passing through Europe and interacting with their European counterparts, thus making the European Renaissance a multicultural Renaissance.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘The American Embassy’ a mother is unable to explain how her young son died to the US immigration authorities in order to show that she deserves refugee status—asked to recount the horrific death of her son, shot by soldiers in her home, she lapses into silence. This mother must establish her right to the category ‘deserving’ through an enunciation of a trauma she cannot enunciate. Within the ghettos of dystopian cultural texts, such as the writings of Octavia Butler and the more recent MaddAdam trilogy of Margaret Atwood, there is often the rhetoric of the deserving and undeserving. The determination of who deserves and who does not becomes the key focus of institutional structures of receiving societies and migrants and refugees are often forced, as Aihwa Ong has demonstrated in the case of South East Asian and Chinese migration to the USA (2003), to assimilate and fulfil odd and unreasonable cultural requirements to be categorized as ‘deserving’.

In the face of this dystopian thinking and the staging of resistance, however, a different staging is also increasingly visible.
This now-iconic photograph constitutes a response to the dystopian imagination. Such claims about the photograph above could be readily dismissed as embodying the usual melodramatization and spectacularization of suffering, an integral part of late 20th century consumption, from Oprah to trauma-memoirs. While admitting to the hyperconsumption of trauma as a feature of contemporary life, I would modify the terms of description slightly.

The photograph is less a spectacle of suffering—the drowned do not suffer, not any more—than an appeal.

The photograph functions as an appeal precisely because it addresses the demographic dystopian thinking and rhetoric that tethers the refugee crisis. The solitary, forlorn body is juxtaposed in our imaginations with the masses of people crowding railway tracks etc. It is an appeal because despite the horrific visuals of the starving, bruised, clearly emaciated crowds, suffering is still unique, singular and embodied. The clamour of the crowds seeking entry into European nations is in sharp contrast to the silenced toddler, unaware during his lifetime of even his identity as ‘refugee’. I am, as should be evident, refusing to name the individual, for the simple reason that the toddler is more than a name, he is now a symbol, a metaphor, but this is not to reduce him, rather to enhance his significance as a determinant of meaning. The singularity and stark isolation of one drowned toddler, functions in contrast to the weeping, often angry faces of the crowds at railways stations and ports.

The disappearance through death of the entire family of one man and the subsequent visuals of the mourning father/husband brings into play an interesting mode of appeal. It invokes structural
similarities of the *family* to force us to think of structural difference of poverty and oppression (Chouliaraki 71). The man with a family is structurally similar to all those with families. But the appeal is through the contrast wherein, due to geopolitical reasons and systematic oppression/deprivation (from civil war), he has *lost* his family, and we haven’t. From structural similarity to structural difference is the movement the appeal capitalizes on.

This structural difference also brings home to us the distance from which we view the events unfolding ‘there’. Our take-it-for-granted safety is appealed to, by people, singular or anonymised, who are placed in conditions of not just vulnerability but structural helplessness. The distance is more than geographic: it is a distance of sustaining environments for life from environments that no longer sustain life.

The visual of the drowned toddler appeals to the economy of scarcity (that our safety/abundance comes at the expense of others) rather than the earlier era’s economy of abundance (that we can feed others because we have plenty, Chouliaraki 75). At whose cost has European prosperity been achieved? Where is the history of centuries of colonialism in their current self definitions of national identity, the rhetoric of entrepreneurism and dynamic economies? Significant and disturbing questions of First World interventions in Third World economies, the installation of puppet and oppressive regimes, arming militia and the *mediated* conflicts in the Middle East come into play if we analyse the sources of European prosperity. An instance would be the food manufacturing giant Nestlé, headquartered in Switzerland, and whose trade practices, vis a vis Africa have come in for criticism for some time now. That banana republics, terror organizations and military regimes are often propped up by Euro-America for the profit of, say, petroleum giant Shell, is now a truism (Dutch Shell was the Nigerian activist Ken Saro Wiwa’s key target, for which he was hanged by the state in 1995).

There indeed exists the possibility of voyeuristic consumption and the transformation of suffering into spectacle, and people might call for an end to this commodification of suffering. However, given the excessive dystopian thinking and the absence of response to appeals from the fleeing refugees, visuals such as the one above cannot be avoided because they help us ask questions about the structural conditions that produced that suffering. Questions here would include the nature of attempts to restore peace in Syria, the nature and scope of UN action the nature and scope of Amnesty, Red Cross help/aid, among others. The visual is an appeal to examine not suffering as such, but the conditions that drowned the toddler: he did not just drown in water, he drowned in conditions that introduced him into the water, conditions over which he had no control and which he clearly did not comprehend. That is, it is not the vulnerable child in and of itself that centres our attention but the conditions that consigned him to the state of utter and irreversible helplessness.

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1 For a recent update on the list of controversies around the brand see [http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/Five-Nestle-Controversies-You-Never-Knew-About/2015/06/06/article2852560.ece](http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/Five-Nestle-Controversies-You-Never-Knew-About/2015/06/06/article2852560.ece)
We live in a global culture that relies (excessively?) on visual representations for political orientations, argues Elizabeth Dauphinée (2007), but cautions that ‘the ethics of employing that imagery toward projects that seek to redress the causes of pain are therefore ambivalent and unclear’ (153). This concern comes close to an earlier anxiety expressed by Barbie Zelizer about the normalization of atrocity with the excessive circulation of these images. Dauphinée is pondering the risk of the unethical circulation and consumption of such imagery, but is unable to propose what else we might substitute in its place. So, is there anything else that could stand in place of the drowned toddler that would invoke similar, strong sentiments? While desensitization is a possible outcome of such images, there is no means of knowing whether this is the only effect the images produce. Commentators argue that the proliferation of body horror online ‘decontextualize’ the body’s pain. But it is also possible that recognition of suffering comes to the spectator because we share a body. Philosophers like Kelly Oliver (2001) therefore propose that witnessing such atrocity means that the self and the Other are connected through the circulation of biosocial energies. The appeal that the visual represents above is what mediates the self’s relation with the culturally, racially and geographically distant Other. It inserts the Other into our field of vision but also into our sense of ourselves: we are safe here, but look at them. This circulation of biosocial energies engages civil society, even from a distance. Civil society, in this particular case, global civil society, has put pressure on governments to respond, evidenced by visuals on subsequent days after one drowned toddler changed the public imagination, of Germans waiting at the border with placards saying ‘Welcome.’ (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11847545/Migrant-crisis-Refugees-welcomed-in-Germany-like-war-heroes-as-Berlin-expects-10000-in-one-day.html).

Visuals such as these may not constitute the traditional sense of the public sphere as the space of rational debate, but they constitute a sentimentalizing of the global public sphere. In days to come, perhaps it is likely that the refugees will not fit in, that they may assert cultural rights once their basic safety is assured. But at this point in time, global civil society responds to an undeniable feature of the visual: children ought not to die this way, and so those fleeing for their lives need to first be assured that their lives are lives too. The appeal therefore is not to questions of eligibility, racial background or cultural difference. The appeal is to the distant, safe viewing of this kind of visual that we perform, but to a visual we respond nevertheless because of the circulation of biosocial energies. If, for instance, we can term ethnicide a ‘crime against humanity’ since the days of Nuremberg, then why would it be impossible to see aid to the needy refugee, whatever race or ethnicity s/he belongs to, as a ‘shot for humanity’?

Author’s Note: The title of this piece is intentionally resonant with the title of a classic text in Holocaust writing, by Primo Levi. Levi has argued that the true witnesses to the Holocaust are really the drowned, for they experienced the event to the fullest, and did not live to speak about it. The saved are the ones who are slightly distanced from the events, and who live with guilt but
filled with a sense of purpose to tell the tale of those who never will. I invoke Levi’s title because his metaphors centre the image that centres this piece.

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References