The Unsacred and the Spectacularized: Alan Kurdi and the Migrant Body

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Abstract
While images can provide a transformative experience, they can also become objects of virtual voyeurism, functioning within regimes of representation while possessing the power to resist dominant ideologies. This article examines this phenomenon of “claiming the dead and dispossessing them” through the case study of Alan Kurdi who became an iconic symbol representing the trauma of people fleeing conflict zones in the Middle East. As an iconic image, it raised awareness of the plight of the Syrian refugees, but the image also became locked into a “sensorium” (Rancière) where it created communion through its pathos but equally was trapped into an aesthetic regime which re-centered the migrant body as a new type of (in)humanity in Europe. The Internet as a platform for this sensorium constantly re-appropriates iconic imagery into new artistic and creative formats where images can be stripped from context, re-hashed, and endlessly circulated as cultural artifacts, bearing the burden of history yet being disenfranchised from it.

Keywords
migrant, image, death image, iconic imagery, memes

Introduction
The Internet is a body snatcher. Dead bodies possess a certain cachet online, whether they be the results of beheadings or fallen bodies. Our abjection to the dead online and our remaking of dead bodies illuminate the Internet as a medium where the dead occupy a space of restlessness, kept alive through circulation and re-combination of form through the architecture of the Internet where they can be transformed into martyrs, figures of pity, or ‘memetic avatars’ that are invoked time and again. The dead occupy the spectrum between art and profanity and equally between the sacred and grotesque, opening ethical and moral limits in representing the unpresentable.

This article looks at the body of the “refugee” as a site of the spectacular through the numerous drownings of refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea to seek salvation in Europe. Branded as the migrant rather than the refugee (see Goodman, et al., 2017), the drowning body speaks about how visually we claim the dead and repossess them through online rituals drawing on the Internet’s architecture where images cross over into an unstable regime where they can be morphed and stripped of their context, to be re-appropriated and reimagined through new consumption and commemoration rituals. The architecture of the Internet is also pledged to the “viral” where an object of exchange can be transformed through its mass circulation and the attendant communal gaze where an object can become publicly owned through these viral consumption modes where the rate of exchange and consumption can accord its value.

While digital technologies, particularly smartphones, can enable increased visibility into the hidden and the unknown, this very access to new media technologies and the enhanced visuality of the world through digital and convergent technologies constantly challenges our notions of the taboo and the sacred online. Hence, the notion of a “moral spectatorship” online is a site of intense contestation where attendant discussions are not only limited to moral action or responsibility or our sense to feel for the other but more fundamentally as a site of consumption culture where new meanings can emerge through re-appropriation of images in a platform which facilitates a multitude of activities beyond the altruistic. Images of pity and perversity online acquire cultural resonance through the specter of mass and viral consumption where they can be repossessed and remade. In the migrant...
crisis, the Other as an object of pity enters a realm where it can be claimed, dispossessed, and resurrected. Our incessant gaze into traumatic events seeks to impress an immediacy and proximity to the Other without perhaps an attendant intimacy and understanding of their predicament. This non-stop gaze through image platforms online transforms the Other into a spectacularized body where there is an insatiable appetite to consume trauma and to commit them as objects of gaze but not as subjects of abandonment in the boundary politics of Fortress EU.

Images leap and become new modes of signification in the new media economy. They get morphed and abstracted into popular culture as memes and, in the process, illuminate the instability of the Internet as a platform for commemoration and communion through image and imagery particularly in the case of the iconic (Ibrahim, 2017). Death imagery is an exceptionally problematic proposition on the Internet. Corpses can become a site of both the profane and the sacred, igniting death rituals of martyrdom and also myth-making (see Ibrahim, 2015a, 2015b). They can be roused from death to be remade as commodities for exchange in the Internet’s attention-seeking economy. Rice with body-snatching rituals where corpses get repossessed and reinscribed through humanity’s obsession with the abject, the Internet performs to the human condition, invoking apparitions and phantoms through corpses such that the dead occupy a liminal sphere of virtual immortality. Hence, the project of “moral spectatorship” of the Other online is a site of conflicted morality positioned between fear of the Other and the suffering of another without settling on any one position but flitting through a sensorium of affect that death imagery produces. In the process, it places moral expectations on the act of spectatorship, expecting them to be autonomous subjects. As emancipated spectators, they are perceived as “active interpreters who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves and who ultimately make their story their own” (Rancière, 2007, p. 280).

The online circulation of images of trauma stripped from their political context means that digital platforms become a theater of human ordeal. There is a pull to consume the spectacular as it becomes transformed into Rancière’s “aesthetics of politics” where bodies become objects of gaze encoded through the refugee politics of exclusion. Digital consumption, duplication, and en masse circulation of images appropriate migrant bodies as objects of spectacle without dispensing them as contentious and political forms in the immigration politics of the EU. In the process, digital imaging produces an “empty intimacy” where migrant bodies are dispossessed through consumption and circulation economies, disseminating trauma but equally categorizing them within border politics and distancing them as transgressive bodies. When images become reified as iconic imagery, the migrant body invites a gaze of pathos where it resides in a contested space between “artification” (see Erjavec, 2012) and politics. Here, artification alludes to creative, artistic, and material practices, which may acquire art-like features and status over time. In our contemporary landscape, memes are increasingly seen as not just features of the Internet but an artistic and creative practice in their own right and recognized as a democratic art form as evident in the curation of memes as artistic exhibits (see Goklani & Kane, 2017; Thompson, 2016).

The “Boy on the Beach”

In 2015, the image of Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach drew worldwide attention. A dead child on a beach stood in stark contrast to the beach as a place of family retreat and sandcastles. But for Rob Shields (1990), the beach is also a space of liminality and the carnivalesque. The beach is a front line of Europe and becomes a site of death, devastation, and loss while the migration crisis confronts the West. Alan’s lifeless body bore testimony to the failed attempts by Syrians who drown attempting to reach European shores. The drowned and rescued bodies in the Mediterranean stood for the trauma of forced migration and the risks people take with their lives and their most precious possession, their progeny. The recurrent trope of dead bodies on the beach and the sea encapsulates the biggest migration crisis in living memory (Smith, 2015). The United Nations’ refugee agency reported that since September 2016, some 4,337 people are believed to have drowned attempting to reach Europe, and between September till August 2017, a further 4,185 people died (see Dehghan, 2017).

Three-year-old Alan Kurdi’s tragic death on foreign shores immortalized the humanitarian crisis of Syrian forced migration and invited global attention to the unfolding crisis. An image of Alan being carried by a grim-faced policeman went viral within hours, becoming the top-trending picture on Twitter under the hashtag #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik (humanity washed ashore; Smith, 2015). Nilüfer Demir of the Doğan News Agency photographed Alan and sought to “express the scream of his silent body” through his death imagery which became a symbol of all the children who lost their lives trying to reach safety in the West (Walsh, 2015). As one of the biggest stories of 2015, the image was seen as shaping the debate on the migrant crisis and was responsible in part for Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to open Germany’s doors to refugees (Ensor, 2016). In the United Kingdom, it prompted a reaction from David Cameron promising that the United Kingdom would take in 4,000 Syrian refugees a year.

An image of a dead child is a media taboo. Most organizations have a loose rule that images of corpses are not printed and it is rare to see a picture of a dead body in a newspaper. Not all news organizations ran the tragic images of Alan Kurdi. The BBC, for example, decided against using the most graphic image of Alan’s body. Others such as The Independent published the graphic imagery in full on its front page. According to the paper’s deputy managing editor,
Will Gore, “It’s right that we should use images of death rarely, otherwise they will lose their power” (cited in Gunter, 2015). Alan Kurdi’s dead body had power, it had the power to scream at the abysmal and pathetic reaction from an anemic global community to the Syrian crisis and forced migration. Alan Kurdi became a *memento mori* of the West’s frozen inhumanity.

### The Sensorium of Death

Alan Kurdi, as an image of a dead child on the beach fully clothed with his tiny formal shoes intact, ignited an immediate reaction by the global public. He resonated as an image, which could be appropriated by anyone. In contrast to Kevin Carter’s photo of a Sudanese child with a bloated stomach and emaciated frame, Alan Kurdi’s chubby legs and “sleeping” pose in the arms of the policeman was not an alien image. The resonance and the dissonance of the beach as a space of pleasure and retreat and the confusion over whether the child was dead or alive keep the spectator hoping for a different outcome. To the Western audience, he did not produce a disconnect as an alien migrant body. He could be anyone’s child. His face pressed into the sand of the beach was accessible to a global audience, thus eradicating race and space in a composition of pathos. Unlike Carter’s famine child in Sudan in 1993, Alan was accessible to both the West and rest of the world. His body was not immediately consigned to the “migrant” race seeking to infiltrate the shores of Europe. The first readings were outpourings of grief, of questions of “what if that was my child?” The image enabled a global claim to this dead body, and for the West the dead child washed ashore on a beach seeking sanctuary in Europe was a blown-up image of its failed conscience with the forced migration crisis at its door step. It took a dead toddler to re-awaken the West from its deep moral coma. Children in distress and a dead child in particular have a power to move a consuming community and to produce affectivity. But whether such images have a potency to initiate a sustained material engagement with humanity or to arrest its impotency in a human crisis has remained a wider challenge for media and audience studies. News thrives on trauma but the Internet can make traumatic images float infinitum, disrupting the temporality of mortality particularly with images of death. Iconic dead bodies enter into an aesthetic regime, highlighting the Internet as a medium where images lose form and meaning and where corpses can be remade and resurrected as apparitions to roam and traverse the virtual realm.

Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of Alan Kurdi on the beach produced a “sensorium”—a “necro-aesthetics” where the image transcended into a realm of “jouissance,” invoking a whole array of affective reaction in the public, particularly online. It equally elongated academic inquiry into the moral spectatorship of suffering (see Durham, 2018; Goodman, Sirreyeh, & McMahon, 2017; Mortensen, 2017; Parker, Naper, & Goodman, 2018). In the sphere of the Internet, Alan’s death imagery possessed a life and momentum of its own propelled by its iconic status as the symbol of the Mediterranean refugee crisis. Death as an iconic memory on the Internet reveals humanity’s abject obsession with mortality and equally the ways in which modernity banishes the corpse and sanitizes death. Death is made clinical and the corpse invisible. In the screen culture of the Internet, certain deaths can cross into iconic stature, gaining a spectatorship through their morbidity (see Ibrahim, 2015a, 2015b). The premature death of a child has a haunting quality and the precocity of a child’s death further extends the interest in Alan Kurdi as a subject of death. Alan, neatly dressed and with smart shoes, interlocks with other intertextual images of shoes such as those of the death camps during the Holocaust. The pathos of Alan’s journey (from home to sea to his death) and his pressed face on the sand produced an outpouring of unfathomable grief. Online, Alan Kurdi was resurrected as a resonant image through memes where the initial creative renderings called attention to Europe’s inertia and moral stupor in the face of the Mediterranean crisis.

The reconfiguration of the photographs of Alan into a proliferation of memes affirms the attention that the tragedy created online but equally it highlighted that iconic death imagery produces a “necro-aesthetics” where death, disasters, and corpses cross ethical boundaries to produce new aesthetic modes, which can be entwined with social and political context and yet be stripped of it. As such, iconic death imagery becomes part of an “aesthetic regime” (Rancière, 2009) where it is both bound and unbound with the political, possessing potential to reiterate the ideological and social but equally the possibilities for autonomy and transgression. In discussing the term “artification,” Erjavec (2012) covers the broad terrain of artifacts, events, and processes that are initially not regarded as art but may acquire such designation, to a greater or smaller degree, at a later time by appropriating or acquiring some art-like features. Aleš Erjavec (2012) contends that “in contemporary art, it is increasingly the ‘process,’ or the ‘event’ of the artistic act, including its contextual placement, that makes a work into a work of art.” This “overlapping of the aesthetic and artistic experience being essentially linked to political, moral, and ethical judgments.” While memes may not be considered art in the traditional sense of the word, it is transformed into something “art-like and influenced by artistic ways of thinking and practising.” It is not the remit of this article to have a fully fledged discussion of memes as art. However, the article recognizes that memes can coalesce into artistic practice and art forms in their own right where the social capital of the memes resides in the accumulation of value through its viral quality, leveraging on the resonance of the event while acquiring value through the act of sharing relentlessly.

As a form of cultural phenomenon which uses mimetics, image, and the architectural and spectral dimensions of the Internet, a meme is about performance, authenticity, and display where it is designed to be consumed through communities
which attribute meaning through its intertextual qualities. Equally, it also has the potential for abstraction and subversion. Memes are democratic and autonomous yet heterogeneous. While memes have been observed in a multitude of ways (see Ibrahim, 2016), this article examines memes as a realm of creative and artistic practice which produce an aesthetic regime, coalescing the rational and the affective, disrupting the representational while immersing audiences into a sensorium.

For Jacques Rancière (2009, p. 32), politics can produce aesthetic activity in the “polemical redistribution of subjects and objects, places and identities, spaces and times, visibilities and meanings.” With new techniques of production, reproduction, and communication along with the emergence of new forms of social life and commodity culture, the boundaries between art and other spheres of life became fluid and porous in modernity. The realm of aesthetics in witnessing the collapse of boundaries and hierarchies enables an infinite openness and equally an indiscernibility between art and life. Rancière’s notion of aesthetics means that works of art are grasped in a specific sphere of experience. Rancière (1999, p. 2) makes a distinction “between two modes of access to sense experience”: logos, rendering sensible a world of justice and injustice, and pathos, restricting the sensible to the domain of pain and pleasure.

Memes as a form of death ritual subvert death into new political and aesthetic modes of experience. In doing so, they elongate death into a creative enterprise which rests on the mimetic and viral properties of the Internet while drawing on the political. The Internet as a fluid medium, with its propensity to accumulate attention or what we call “virality,” provides a platform to remake the dead through the aesthetic practices of the meme where its value is located in the concept of sharing and spectacle. It draws on the resonance of Alan Kurdi’s death photographs and the pathos of the Mediterranean drownings against Fortress Europe. The spectacle and trauma of Alan’s tragic journey is re-appropriated as a mimetic play on the Internet where he is endlessly recreated through the morbidity of his demise against a hard-line Europe. Alan’s global recognition through his death meant that these memes located his death within the wider political crisis of forced migration and the dearth of a political response. The memefication online of Alan Kurdi thrust him into an “aesthetic regime” which could thwart the political while co-locating it. The memes negotiated the taboo of a dead child as a point of creative play online while calling attention to the medium of the Internet as a platform for new forms of death rituals and for the comingling of the sacred and profane as well as logos and pathos.

For Rancière, any profane object can enter the frame of aesthetic experience, and any artistic production can become part of the framing of collective life (see Dronsfield, 2008, p. 3). The sensorium produced by the pathos of Alan Kurdi on the beach reasserted the creative play and virality of the Internet where objects and subjects can be abstracted from their context and remade. Equally, the profane and sacred subjects can be part of the aesthetic experience with or without connecting to the political. For Rancière (2000/2004), “art is political to the extent that it is able to distance itself, separate itself from such functions through the use of the materials it draws from the social” (p. 258). Dronsfield (2008, p. 4) points out that for Rancière, political art is a dialectic between the apolitical and the political, retaining something of both, in a manner that reconfigures collective life yet redraws aesthetic sensibility from other spheres of experience. This dialectic draws on political intelligibility while retaining sensory foreignness.

Rancière perceives political art as producing a “double effect,” ingrafting both political signification and sensory shock, thwarting and undermining signification. It premises on the notion that there is no causal or determinate link between why understanding the state of the world should lead to a decision to change it (Dronsfield, 2008, p. 4). Memes as creative and aesthetic practices redistribute the sensible while drawing on the common and resonant material world (which position us as a collective), providing a new visibility by building a relationship between thought and affectivity. By drawing on a common material world, they can fictionalize the real, forging new intimacies between the “corpse” and the environment or in making them alien to each other while invoking an aesthetic experience or sensorium. In this aesthetic sensorium, boundaries and distinctions between objects of thought or sensuous objections disappear with the comingling of senses (pathos) with thought (logos) (Rancière, 2001, pp. 31-38). This coalescing of the rational with the sensuous means that art and artistic practices can disrupt by breaking away from the representative and, in Rancière’s terms, “redistributing sensibilities” (Stejskal, 2012, p. 6). The potential for memes to disrupt stable forms of sensory community experience means they can shift the representative to the aesthetic regime of art. Memes as aesthetic practices can contest, subvert, as well as reframe, and as such they harbor political potential. For Rancière, aesthetic practices create dis-sensus “where the obviousness of the distribution of bodies, voices, and capacities break down, rejecting the notion that things have single and definitive meaning.” At the heart of the aesthetic regime is the ability of art to redistribute the sensible, highlighting the complex relationship between art and life (Tanke, 2011).

In constructing memes as an aesthetic practice and a ritual of therapy and recovery during death and disaster events, the Internet is illuminated as a space for emergent cultural and creative practices which conjoin art and life and “re-distribute sensibilities” while abstracting common materials which engage a community. Our obsession with death and corpses against modernity’s project to banish death and dying implicates new types of cultural obsessions with death and mortality or what I term “necro-aesthetics.” Necro-aesthetics give rise to an array of rituals and forms of sensorium, which resist death online through its ineradicable qualities and
equally through its virality where aesthetic practices draw on mimetics as a mode of practice. Considering memes as a form of aesthetic practice, which draw us into a regime of aesthetics, provides a means to validate the creative enterprise of the Internet as well as its ability to produce art in profane conditions while blurring boundaries and hierarchies. Necro-aesthetics is both a bind with the political and apolitical and, in the process, memes redistribute sensibilities. In so doing, it can celebrate the profane while abstracting “sense from sense,” locating it through the sensory as an aesthetic practice (Rancière, 2009).

**Necro-Aesthetics and Digital Immortality**

The images of Alan Kurdi, when first through the media, made an immediate impact and provoked an outpouring of grief with a global audience. Despite some political overtures to address the crisis, the responses were short-lived. A year after Alan’s death, his father lamented,

> Everyone claimed they wanted to do something because of the photo that touched them so much. But what is happening now? People are still dying and nobody is doing anything about it. (cf. Ensor, 2016)

Similarly, Amnesty International commented that

> one year after the body of Alan Kurdi was washed up on a beach in Turkey, thousands of refugees continue to die in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. The public outcry should have marked a political turning point, but the global response to the refugee crisis since Alan’s death has been an utter disaster. (cf. Ensor, 2016)

The necro-aesthetics of the Internet produce a double bind where there is an abstraction of the corpse into aesthetic and digital modes without necessarily inducing an engagement or responsibility to the conditions that induced the death. There may be a pull to the pathos of the death imagery without an intense engagement with the context of the politics the tragic event evokes. While Alan Kurdi’s death brought attention to the plight of the refugees in the crisis in the Mediterranean in the immediate time frame, the pull was to the image of his death and the refugee crisis faded into a pathos—a mere backdrop. Alan Kurdi produced a sensorium in which the Internet re-resurrected him through grief and trauma but also as a dead entity who can be reimagined and re-appropriated in different avatars. The possession of the corpse online as an “artistic project” means it straddles the duality of Rancière’s partition of the senses where it can respond to the political context, but equally it can be re-appropriated as an object and subject of scrutiny, gaze, and jouissance.

Alan Kurdi became an object of individual and communal fascination. Death as an abject device in the human psyche created a pull to the toddler’s lifeless body, but the properties of the Internet re-borned him from a political tool to a cultural symbol: “the cute dead boy on the beach.” Alan Kurdi’s story inspired a multitude of artistic endeavors around the world. Chinese activist and artist, Ai Weiwei, recreated the plight of Alan Kurdi by lying on a pebbled beach on the Greek island of Lesbos (Tan, 2016). The mimetics of death as such was recreated in a proliferation of artistic enterprise through the common material of the dead toddler seeking sanctuary. The Internet produced a transcendence where the death of the child as a public spectacle invoked the sacred but the subsequent re-appropriation of him as an apparition as part of meme culture released him as a phantom of representation and reification online. The Internet has a spectral quality where its immateriality produces a Derridean hauntology where figures are neither dead nor alive, neither present nor invisible, recasting solid foundations and definitions (Derrida, 1994). Fredric Jameson points out that examining this spectrality may present more ways to deconstruct meaning than through the living present (cited in Davis, 2005). Reproduction is made possible in the spectral even if it fragments the very act of replication, mediating its ability to represent the real. With the spectral, its meaning and sense is dependent on something that is not there but that which haunts and returns (Peim, 2005, p. 74). The Internet celebrates the spectral where corpses invite ghosts to drive pain and pleasure.

Our fascination with death and death imagery online unleashes an abject gaze and a renewed obsession with it, particularly iconic death imagery. This necro-aesthetics entails the crossing into the unrepresentable and into the taboo of death in modernity, creating new forms of proximity to it without the attendant intimacy. Necro-aesthetics as such is contentious, for it reveals our fascination with the corpse and also our resistance against death in modernity, that which we have yet to resolve with science or technological invention. Our appropriation of death imagery and death narratives are also a means to come to terms with death as inevitable. Being a “death icon” on the Internet is problematic. The abstraction of Alan Kurdi’s corporeal body into the digital realm produces a liminality where he is never laid to rest but is amenable to resurrections through people’s curiosity of the dead and artistic endeavors which plunder the corpse or common resources or objects of pity.

This digital immortality and the resonance of the image to a community or mass audience means that the image enters a relationship with production and consumption economies where its signification will be endlessly employed in the commemoration rituals and also to transgress these as a form of shock value. Necro-aesthetics and digital immortality through iconic status means that the body will continue to be abstracted from its context to be recreated and reimagined through its identifiability and cultural resonance with a global community. Memes, and the morphing and re-mixing of formats online, lend to this necro-aesthetics where
mourning rituals will happen alongside projects, which exploit the iconic value of the image. If memes are part of the democratic aspect of the Internet due to their accessibility and dissemination where they can be shared and produced, then iconic death produces an environment where the corpse is communally owned and re-appropriated in creative endeavors and emergent death rituals. Iconic death imagery and digital immortality rest on the fascination and obsession of the communal gaze where Alan Kurdi’s death imagery becomes both part of the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean but equally an image which can hold an identity as a figure of pity and provocation even when stripped and displaced from its socio-political context.

**Reinscribing the Migrant Body on the Internet**

After the initial grief and politics of pity over Alan Kurdi’s images where he was seen as transcending race and space, the subsequent readings of his death and the depictions online sought to recode him through the neoliberal migrant politics where he is the unwanted, not deserving pity, and a target for vitriol. This meant that Alan Kurdi’s sacred renderings as the dead child on the beach were reinscribed through the profane as a “suspect and deviant” figure of neoliberal politics where the displaced and desperate are constantly recorded as opportunists seeking to infiltrate borders and presenting new forms of security issues for states and societies. Alan Kurdi inspired an extreme profanity from *Charlie Hebdo*, the French satirical magazine, which suggested he would have grown up to be a sexual abuser like those immigrants allegedly involved in assaults in Cologne (Meade, 2016). Under the headline “Migrants,” the magazine showed “two lascivious pig-like men with their tongues hanging out chasing two terrified, screaming women who are running away.” The question at the top of the drawing “What would little Alan have grown up to be?” is answered at the bottom by “Ass groper in Germany” (Meade, 2016). The cartoon was published a week after the anniversary of the attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, when free speech organizations stated that the photos were fake or staged (see *The Observers*, *SBS News*, 2017).

Alan Kurdi’s dead body as such became a site for myth-making, drawing on the political climate of a dwindling humanitarian response to the forced migration crisis around the world, particularly in Syria. The dead toddler could be easily reimagined not as a child who died trying to flee from the turmoil of his motherland but someone who is a suspect figure loaded with the associations of the “war on terror” since 9/11. Alan Kurdi body was co-opted into a wider mythology of the Middle Eastern Other, as a constant source of threat and destruction to the beleaguered West (see Bozdag & Smets, 2017). As such, images invoking pity and those which reassert them as human can be subverted into a wider project of Orientalism and mythologizing of the dangerous migrant. The innocent dead child can easily be transformed into the lascivious figure who will rape “our women” and “impoverish us morally and culturally.” The Internet lends to both the instability of the image and equally to conspiracy theories and fake and false economies, which mesh and marry the incompatible, forming relationships with the unrelated objects and subjects distorting time and space. The migrant, as part of a contentious politics of the unwanted, is a diseased body where he can be abstracted for myth-making and in thwarting our moral responses to the displaced and dispossessed.

There has been much written about “moral spectatorship,” the distant suffering and politics of pity (see Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Ibrahim, 2010). The notion of the West consuming the rest and the attendant consumerism and fetish which can accrue through the acts of watching the suffering of another invites critique into this cartography of the West consuming the suffering Other (i.e., east and global south). This critique of orientalism further problematizes the scholarship on moral spectatorship (see Ibrahim, 2018). What is also under-theorized is the conflicted nature of this morality and the modes of its abstraction online. The phenomenon of necro-aesthetics reveals that morality is a contested site of pleasure, pity, and abstraction of the corpse into art and parody. There are constant incursions. As these images are released online, they become part of a wider economy of production and consumption where there are possibilities for creative practices and for the “carnivalesque” (Bakhtin, 1984) where the body snatching becomes a politics of subversion and play. The reinscribing of Alan Kurdi as a suspect migrant figure is a means to empty out the pity and revert the “migrant” to the category that is not amenable to pity and the humane. The fascination with iconic death imagery can produce both martyrdom and rituals of commemoration online but equally endeavors which seek to...
make the authentic fake and inauthentic real to expiate the politics of pity. Pictures which cut through to a whole humanity when others have entered the realm of the banal inhibit a space of the iconic. The iconic remains a site of abject myth-making and re-appropriation where it straddles spaces of resonance and instability making a relationship with activities of subversion and reification and everything betwixt.

Representing the Unrepresentable

One of the biggest challenges for modern culture and its modes of representation is how do you remember and speak of the past, particularly when the past is unrepresentable. Adorno’s proposition “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” often circulating as a two-word sound bite “After Auschwitz” has been interpreted in a number of ways (see Rothberg, 1997). It locates the Holocaust as an onerous challenge to human articulation and expression post event (Martin, 2006). The reference to the death camp and its temporality in terms of the configuration of history “hereafter” and the break in temporality through “after” capture the significance of the chronotope (i.e., as an event defined through a given space and time). Through the aporia of art as vital yet limited, Adorno critiqued the role of art in a consumerist society where in the aftermath of a human tragedy every artwork was potentially dangerous as it could give pleasure yet diminish the horror of the event where the deference owed to the victims may be violated, squeezing pleasure from suffering (Adorno, 1982, p. 9). Suffering can be turned into a commodity for consumption. For Adorno, the suffering of the victims demands the continued existence of that art, which it simultaneously forbids (Martin, 2006).

In drawing on the phrase in this context, it examines the commodification of the Holocaust and the critique of artistic/consumerist practices post-genocide in modernity. In the context of Alan Kurdi and the appropriation of his image in creative endeavors online, it raises the moral dilemma of commodifying the suffering of forced migration and death through the creation of camps at large and only not in designated zones through a “camp-mentality” (see Gilroy, 2000) and where we have to think about the narration of the “now” where there is no buffer of a time lapse to call it the past. At a global level, this category of humanity is defined by refugees/economic migrants stranded outside the gates of rich countries (Wynter, 2003, p. 261). Zygmunt Bauman (1987) defined these excluded and invisibilized as the “New Poor.” Forced migration has produced a new race of the unwanted and their genocide is not contained through a specified cartography of space and containment per se. Their death, detainment, and expulsion are fluid. As such, new aesthetic techniques become part of this consumer-culture where their non-sacred bodies are spectacularized through the spectral qualities of the Internet.

Albert Camus captioned the 20th century as the “century of the Titanic, of Chernobyl, of Auschwitz and of Hiroshima,” and Virilio, in drawing on this, contends it as the “pitiless century” (Baj & Virilio, 2003, pp. 36-37). The rise in the phenomenon of the pitiless is attributed to contemporary politics of hate such that this pitiless art embraces seductive TV images of carnage (Virilio, 2002) with the technologies of speed and the acceleration of culture producing a culture of virtuality in terms of experience. For Virilio (2006), the Internet is about intense mobility facilitated through its architectural infrastructure, which enables the recalibration of time and space. Artistic expression becomes congruent with this acceleration of speed and virtualization as opposed to being in opposition to it or challenging it (James, 2007, p. 108). Saturation and an excess of shock imagery then produce a desensitization such that pitiless contemporary art is no longer improper but a resonant part of this accelerated living (Virilio, 2010, p. 35). The Internet as a manifest platform of virtuality presents the specter of dead imagery as restless and unsettled.

Conclusion

Agamben (1998) contends that “we are all from the outset refugees in the homogeneous and pervasive space of the camp, entrapped in the complementarity of bare life and exception” (cf. Rancière, 2007). While the spaces of exception was once symbolized through the camp, today it has become more widespread and generalized where sovereign powers can produce “bare life” (as evidenced through the figure of the refugee) in these spatialized biopolitical arrangements. For Agamben (1998), the production of bare life then becomes a mechanism through which to exclude and securitize the borders of sovereign political community. The virtuality of the Internet further entraps “bare life” through its morbid fascination with the corpse. Dead “bare life” gets a second screening online where it is abstracted into complex modes of production and consumption, which strip context and reposition, time and space, to release value and voyeurism. The dead become living ghosts online, and in the process, they reveal humanity’s abject obsession with mortality and the “tragic dead.” Iconic death imagery is processed through an aesthetic regime, which is bound and unbound with the political. The reconfiguration of the death image through memes online and modes of artification confer the dead as an unholy entity where the architecture of the Internet positions the process of ratification which memes are part of as democratic conjoined to a circulation economy, which leverages on sharing, reposting, and sociality, which emerge through these exchanges. The manipulation of images and their attendant meaning online thwart representation while drawing on the resonance of the “tragic iconic” as a global figure. The recoding of Alan Kurdi’s body as part of the unwanted race reveals the moral and ethical challenges of the dead image, its travel, and manipulation online. In the realm of the virtual, this aesthetic regime subsumes new consumption and production processes and rituals. These modes of
appropriation provide a means to commemorate and aestheticize the dead but equally to revive them as zombies and troll figures to denigrate the innocent against a hostile climate against “bare life.” As the seabed becomes the new death camps of the innocent and those seeking sanctuary, the virtual will celebrate and venerate death in equal measures.

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