

The Boy in the Ambulance¹

Kirstine Sinclair

News

In August 2016, the photo of the 5-year-old Omran in an ambulance in Aleppo went viral. Similarly, the photo of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who drowned escaping the war in Syria with his family and washed up on a Turkish beach back in September 2015, went viral. The photo of Omran in a state of complete shock re-actualised the discussion of the child victims of the war in Syria, the world's silent by-standing and the power of iconic photos.

Summary

In October 2015 and again in January 2016, I wrote news analyses about the photo of Aylan Kurdi, the debate surrounding the circulation of the photo, and possible long-term effects of this photo. Now, another photo of a boy falling victim to the war in Syria has been circulated and I am comparing the two photos and raising questions regarding common features and shared emotional reactions.

Key Words

Omran, Aylan Kurdi, Syria, Syrian Refugee Crisis, visual symbols, European Media

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¹ Andrew Katz also covered the rescue of Omran and his family on 18 August 2016: "The Boy in the Ambulance", *Time* <http://time.com/4456905/aleppo-syria-boy-ambulance/?xid=tcoshare> (last accessed 6 October 2016)

Analysis:

As Time Magazine noted: “Dramatic pictures and video footage from Syria of ash-covered children and rescue workers removing bodies from rubble are now commonplace”². However, on 17th August, images of rescue workers pulling the 5-year-old Oman Daqneesh out of the rubble and placing him in an ambulance while they went back to rescue his siblings, stood out and got more attention. Suddenly, the world’s otherwise blind eye on the war in Syria saw something. It saw a boy, shaken badly physically as well as mentally, sitting completely still in a soft chair in the back of an ambulance. The left side of his face was covered in blood but he seemed indifferent to the commotion around him.

In the following, I am going to discuss the picture of Omran in comparison with the picture of Aylan Kurdi on the beach from September 2015 and discuss the emotional responses to such imagery. First of all, I shall provide background information about the photo, the individuals capturing the images and the reception of it.



Omran Daqneesh in the ambulance in Aleppo, 17th August 2016 (*Time*, 26 August 2016)

The photo of Omran in the ambulance and the video recordings were made by Mahmoud Rslan and Mustafa al-Sarout respectively. Rslan (27) used to manage a pastry shop in Aleppo but started participating in the protests against Assad’s regime in 2011

² Katz, Andrew The Night Omran was saved, *Time*, 26 August 2016: <http://time.com/4465904/omran-daqneesh-aleppo-survivor/> (last accessed 6 October 2016)

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and later on, he joined the revolution by contributing with photo documentation of the violence and bombings. Al-Sarout (23) worked as a tailor before the revolution but in 2015, he started working with the anti-government citizen journalist network called "Aleppo Media Center". It was al-Sarout who filmed Omran's rescue.³

The photographer Rslan gave the following account of the rescue of Omran in which he stresses what touched him especially:

"First, I filmed a video when Omran was removed from underneath the rubble and was taken to the ambulance. It was all dark and only the moonlight was there. I changed into photo mode when the child arrived [in the ambulance]. I had mixed feelings about the situation. While taking the photo and looking at the boy, I was crying, while pleased that I was doing my job and taking a powerful photo. I wanted the focus to be clear. When I really started to sob was when I saw the eight-year-old sister of Omran. His sister was as calm as him and she had a similar injury in the face and eye. She made me cry 10 times stronger. We are humans, we are people. I was crying for the children and fearing that my daughter may go through the same experience."

Omran's parents and siblings, his older sister and brother, were all rescued after their home was bombed in the middle of the night. All except the older brother Ali, whose liver and kidney had been seriously damaged, survived.

Rslan felt compelled to document the attack and the rescue and was moved by the sight of the young children falling victim to the regime's bombing of rebel-held east Aleppo. However, it was Omran's sister which provoked the strongest emotional response in him as she reminded him of his own daughter. This emphasizes a typical pattern in human reaction to crises and war: Personal identification results in stronger emotional reactions.

Sarout, who filmed Omran's rescue, gave the video to AMC and went to bed. The next morning, he was contacted by international media agencies and journalists who published the image and wanted him to comment on the situation.⁴ The interest and apparent usefulness of the imagery made him feel powerful: "I felt I did something to this

³ Katz, Andrew The Night Omran was saved, *Time*, 26 August 2016: <http://time.com/4465904/omran-daqneesh-aleppo-survivor/> (last accessed 6 October 2016)

⁴ Katz, Andrew The Night Omran was saved, *Time*, 26 August 2016: <http://time.com/4465904/omran-daqneesh-aleppo-survivor/> (last accessed 6 October 2016).

revolution”⁵, and gave hope that the international society and politicians would stop the Assad regime’s bombings of civilians in Syria.

Today, two months after Omran’s rescue, the war continues and east Aleppo is bombed routinely by the regime. An estimated total of 50,000 children have died in the war in Syria according to the NGO “I am Syria”⁶, and according to the Middle East Analyst James Denselow and al-Jazeera, an estimated 300 children died during the last two weeks of September alone.⁷ Hence, any hope that photo documentation of the suffering will change anything is difficult to maintain. Also, the increase of support for charity work in Syria and supporting refugees from Syria which was documented after the circulation of the photo of Aylan Kurdi in the autumn of 2015 has not been recorded this year. Nor has it even been discussed.

Thus, why are photos still making headlines? Why do we keep sharing them if it does not result in any changes or improvements in Syria? We shall return to these questions later.

The image of Omran in the Ambulance

After being pulled out of his damaged home, Omran was placed in the ambulance by the rescue worker. The video recording shows the 5-year-old sitting in the chair very still with the left side of his face hurt. The left eye is almost shut and blood is running down his cheek. AS the bomb hit the family home in the middle of the night, he is wearing what he must have been sleeping in: a pair of blue shorts and a t-shirt with colourful print on the front. His clothes, hair, face and body is covered in dust from the crumbling building. His arms rest on his thighs. His right eye is wide open, but does not seem to see anything, just as he does not react to the commotion happening around him. At one point, he touches his cheek, looks at the blood on his hand, and wipes it gently on the chair without further reaction. He just sits there. There is no crying, no shouting, no tears, no movement. He awaits what is to come next in silence.

Rslan’s photo of Omran shows him sitting in the chair in the back of the ambulance. The orange colour of the chair and the ambulance first aid gear is striking in comparison with Omran’s dusty face and body. The blood on his face is a dark reddish brown. Apart from the contrast in colours, his facial expression is striking. The dust and the

⁵ Katz, Andrew The Night Omran was saved, *Time*, 26 August 2016: <http://time.com/4465904/omran-daqneesh-aleppo-survivor/> (last accessed 6 October 2016).

⁶ *I am Syria*: <http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html> (last accessed 6 October 2016).

⁷ James Denselow on Twitter: @jamesdenselow, tweet dated 1 October 2016 (last accessed 6 October 2016) and “Syria War: Russia deploys more jets as diplomacy stalls”, *al-Jazeera*, 1 October 2016: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/syria-war-russia-deploys-jets-diplomacy-stalls-161001035014510.html> (last accessed 6 October 2016)

blood signals drama, but the face looks numb with the half-closed left eye, a dead stare in the right eye and no movement around the nose and mouth. Given the serious circumstances and the violent experience, the lack of reaction signals that he is in a state of complete shock.

The powerfulness of the image lies in Omran's calm posture in the middle of chaotic civil war ridden Aleppo. It is common knowledge that 5-year-olds who hurt themselves respond to the pain, the shock and to the blood. The fact that Omran does not react is surprising and striking. Had he screamed or cried for his parents, had he covered his bloody face and cried, we would have seen the ordinary rather than the extraordinary in the situation. The fact that the shock makes him still highlights and makes visible the extraordinary violence in the situation. He has experienced extreme violence and he shows no reaction.

The lack of reaction raises questions regarding what kind of life a 5-year-old in Aleppo in 2016 has known. War is all he has ever known. Furthermore, Omran's silence is a scream in the face of an adult audience: what he has experienced in Aleppo is beyond words. It is indescribable.

The Similarities Between the Photos of Aylan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh

Turning to the photo of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi lying drowned on the Bodrum beach in early September 2015, here we saw a boy with his head buried in the sand who, at first glance, looked as if he was merely sleeping. This one recognised as natural and acceptable: children do sleep in funny positions and children are expected to sleep in order to live healthily. Looking at the picture more closely, it was obvious that no boy would sleep in that position. He was not asleep but dead. This, on the other hand, one reacted to as something unnatural and unacceptable since children are expected to grow old and outlive their parents. The combination of natural/unnatural and acceptable/unacceptable elements in that photo sparked massive emotional responses. Had the picture shown gore or drama, most of us would have looked away, but a seemingly sleeping child has "cat video on social media" attraction and makes us look. And after looking and feeling instant sympathy for the child on the beach, we understand that he has stopped breathing, and lies there like a piece of washed up plastic waste from a ship and that is when the shock of what a war does to human beings hits us.



Aylan Kurdi lying on the beach near Bodrum, 2nd September 2015 (*MSNBC*, 3 September 2015)⁸

Another picture was taken of Omran after his head injury had been treated at the underground hospital. This photo is less striking as it shows a more usual and easily recognisable situation. A boy has hurt his head, the injury has been fitted with a bandage and he is resting as one would following treatment and pain killing medication.



Omran Daqneesh at the hospital in Aleppo, 17 August 2016 (*Time*, 26 August 2016)

⁸ Vinograd and Omar “Aylan Kurdi is the Syrian toddler drowned on Bodrum Beach”, *MSNBC*, 3 September 2015: <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/aylan-kurdi-the-syrian-toddler-drowned-bodrum-beach> (last accessed 10 October 2016)

The comparison between the two images of Omran and the one of Aylan Kurdi illustrates what it takes for a photo to “strike a particular nerve (...) jarring even a public numbed to disaster” as phrased in New York Times.⁹

Just like the photo of Aylan on the beach, the images of Omran in the ambulance contain the ordinary and the extraordinary. They both involve children in seemingly normal, everyday situations – one seemingly sleeping, the other one sitting in a chair – without any apparent drama. Here, I would argue that it is the apparent lack of drama that makes the audience respond to the children in a straightforward manner. Instinctively, we are sympathetic to children in everyday situations, because we remember being children ourselves, we have become parents, we know children personally and like them, or we simply recognise children as a necessary key to human survival on the planet. And then, when we realise what the images are really telling us about violence, carnage and waste of human life, we are shocked and respond equally emotionally to this realisation. This time, however, negatively with anger, fear, sorrow and/or sadness.

Now, returning to the question of why we share photos of wounded and dead children despite previous experience teaching us that photos do not change the political reality and do not stop wars, I think the answer is that we share because we are moved. The first and second waves of emotional reactions compel us to reach out to other humans. By reaching out, we communicate the need to belong to a community just as we add to the existence of such imagined and real communities. Circulating, posting and sharing remind us we are human.

The need to share imagery stirring strong reactions may also be part of a current post-factual political tendency in which public and political debate is dominated by emotions rather than factual information and scientific analyses, but that is a different story.

⁹ Barnard, Anne “The Syrian Boy Pulled from the Rubble in Aleppo”, New York Times, 18 August 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/middleeast/omran-daqneesh-syria-aleppo.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&r=0> (last accessed 7th October 2016)