Vulnerabilities and Invulnerabilities/Absences and Presences.
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In Society & Space (Blog) AYLAN KURDI: COMING TO TERMS WITH AN IMAGE

When I saw the picture on Thursday 4 September in the Dutch newspaper NRC, I immediately turned the page. Away. Admittedly, I was somewhat weak. I just came down with a flue and might thus have been a bit too sensitive. Yet when Darshan Vigneswaran emailed us two days later, already by the subject of the email, “The Little Boy”, I knew what his message would be about. This means that at a glance the picture had done its work. It has etched itself in my memory. Yet turning the page, two days earlier, and turning the picture away from sight indexes confusion. It is indeed the too much to deal with at once.

Only after 5 days did I revisit the picture. I have inserted it here, because as I just found out, many versions were in circulation. And my argument is somewhat connected to this version (it is a picture-collage though, because I decided to ‘re-move’ the body of the little boy, Aylan Kurdi).

As part of the “Little Boy workshop” we were asked to ponder our scholarly attachment and detachments to our objects of study, and to reflect on our
engagements and concerns. Are such pictures not too much to handle for an academic and should we not change hats or repertoires, and hit the street instead of contemplating the picture’s work?

The paradoxical thing about this picture is it calmness, coolness one could say. It does not shout. There is lots of space, lots of water and movement. In the corner we see two bodies: that of the little boy, head down in the water, and that of an officer in action (writing down something? Trying to call for assistance?): He could be a guard or a policeman. The text on his vest indicates that he is a crime scene investigator. There is a crime to be dealt with. But which? I would love to unpack that in more details, in more ethnographic details. But time is too limited here.

In this brief provocation I want to suggest that the picture is intense precisely because of its capacities to fold a number of practices together and to present them at once. One of the things it thus evokes, is vulnerability. At a very first glance, the picture speaks to the vulnerability of the little boy and of children in general. It might also evoke the vulnerability of people that are seeking refuge. Subsequently, it speaks to the vulnerability of parents, evoked by the sight of a dead child. But there are more vulnerabilities going on. I want to suggest that the second body, that of the officer, enacts the vulnerability of Europe...

Vulnerabilities are typically normatively structured: vulnerability is a good and invulnerability is a negative. Whereas vulnerabilities are often allocated to humans, and typically those who are not in powerful positions, invulnerabilities are typically ascribed to institutions or actors that assume too much power.

The picture however, generously invites us to complicate this typological (and easy?) division. The two bodies can also be read as allegories that stand for groups of people versus fortress Europe. The allegories thus speak both to the vulnerability of refugees, trying to get a foot on the ground, and the vulnerability of Europe, failing at keeping its integrity. This vulnerability of Europe was articulated concerted after the revolutions in the Arab world.

While vulnerabilities are up front in the picture, invulnerabilities are made absent. One of these invulnerabilities is the potency and power of NGO’s speaking on behalf of refugees and the power they assume through this very picture. Second invulnerability is that of Fortress Europe and the profound political and legal measures that have accumulated in the past 20 years, or so, and by consequence the expansion of the European border management regime.

This affective play between absences and presences of in/vulnerabilities is to my view what makes this picture so intense.