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Apprehending the "Telegenic Dead": Considering images of dead children in global politics

Abstract:

Images of suffering children have long been used to illustrate the violence and horror of conflict. In recent years it is images of dead children that have garnered attention from media audiences around the world. In response to the deaths of four children killed by the Israeli army while playing on a Gazan beach, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu accused Hamas of generating “telegenically dead” Palestinian children for their cause (CNN 2014). This term is engaged with by this article to consider the appearance of images of dead children in global politics. It draws on a growing literature of the corpse as a subject in international relations, asking how these children’s bodies are understood, following Butler, as ‘grievable lives’. It considers the notion of ‘iconic’ images, the politics of sharing images of dead bodies, and consideration of global power relations that allow certain children’s deaths to be visible and not others. Through this analysis, this article argue that the idea of telegenic death might be productively considered to understand how the fleshy reality of children’s deaths contribute to discussions of the representations and visibility of children in contexts of crisis and conflict.

Introduction

In recent years, images of dead children have been inescapable in visual depictions of conflicts and crises globally. They have been retweeted and shared on social media (Vis and Goriunova 2015; Olesen 2017); published on the front pages of newspapers around the world (Mortensen, Allen and Peters 2017); invoked by world leaders (BBC 2015; Edwards 2017); and turned into memes, artworks and symbols for protest (Mortensen 2017; Vis 2015; Ryan 2015). Such images are not new; there is a long history of the presence of images of children as symbols or icons in war, humanitarian disasters, and political crises including those of Phan Thi Kim Phuc (known as the Vietnam War’s ‘Napalm Girl’), and Kevin Carter’s photo of the vulture and the Sudanese girl from 1993 (see Campbell; Hariman and Lucaites 2003; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015). However, those photos that have garnered traction in recent years

have often been not of suffering children, but rather of dead children. This article is concerned with the interstices of discourses of images of childhood and theorizing a notion of grievability as connected to dead bodies as political subjects. It argues that photographs of children's deaths require us to critically consider how and why certain children's bodies are made visible and what the presence of such images contributes understanding the impacts of images of conflict and crises.

To situate this analysis, I start with a particular phrase that was invoked as a result of the circulation of images of children's deaths in Gaza in 2014. In a July 20, 2014 interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, the prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, accused Hamas of facilitating the deaths of civilians in Gaza, making the following claim: "They want to pile up as many civilian dead as they can... I mean its gruesome, they use telegenically dead Palestinians for their cause. They want the more dead, the better" (CNN 2014). The comment came amidst the escalation of conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in July and August 2014. It was specifically prompted by the deaths of four Palestinian boys, killed by Israeli shelling while playing on the beach. The four boys killed were all members of the extended Bakr family: Ahed Bakr, 11, Muhammed Bakr, 11, Zakaria Bakr, 10, and Ismail Bakr, 9. Three other boys and a thirty-year-old man were injured.

The deaths were captured because they occurred on a beach next to a hotel occupied by members of the foreign media. The first shell from an Israeli naval vessel hit fishermen's boats near where the boys were playing on the spit, prompting the boys to run away across the beach. The second shell hit the boys as they ran. The way the events unfolded meant that there is a pictorial record of not just the aftermath of the event but the moments immediately before and during the event as well. As well as a photograph of the four young boys in yellow body bags with just their heads showing laid out in a row, there is a photograph taken from the hotel of the boys running across the beach in the last seconds of their lives, and another one of the cloud of smoke and sand in the instant of destruction. Later, another photograph of the before-moment from a different angle is also circulated on social media; as well as photographs of a small boy with his body twisted awkwardly, lying on the sand. In another, a man carries one small body past the sand where another small boy lies

awkward-limbed in death. It is these photographs that appear, first on Twitter, retweeted and shared before being covered by news outlets. NBC correspondent Ayman Mohyeldin tweeted that he had passed the boys on his way back to the hotel and had kicked a soccer ball with them briefly (Mohyeldin 2014), and it was this tweet that was the catalyst for the Twitter response.

The construction of Gazan children's deaths as telegenic by the Israeli PM is a politicised invocation. It asks the viewer to be outraged that Hamas would 'generate' bodies that are good for television, while absolving Israeli forces of wrongdoing in producing those bodies. However, and of key interest to this article, it also contains a recognition that certain deaths—particularly those of children—are particularly suited for telecast and consumption. 'Telegenic' implies appealing to view in some way.

This notion of 'telegenic death' provides a term to consider other images of dead children that have garnered attention. Of these, none have had the resonance the death of Alan¹ Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish background, who drowned in September 2015 while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea with his family, and was photographed lying on the shoreline of a Turkish beach. Kurdi's older brother, five-year-old Galip, mother Rihan, and at least twelve others from the same boat died that day. However, it was the photograph of Kurdi lying face down on the beach, in a red t-shirt and blue shorts, his shoes still on, that went viral on social media and made the front page of major newspapers around the world. The image was unavoidable for several days, with print, television and social media reproducing the image incessantly. There was a second photograph, of a Turkish policeman carrying his tiny body away, that also often appeared alongside the photo. Many other children both before and since Kurdi's death have died on the beaches of the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe, and although photographed by journalists extensively, their images have not been widely circulated. Neither have the large volume of photographs published of adults trying to reach Europe garnered the same attention as Kurdi's image. There was also much discussion about the appropriateness of sharing this image, concerns which largely focused on the "distressing" nature of the image, and

¹ Initially reported as Aylan.

whether viewers should have a choice about seeing it (the potential distress of relatives of Kurdi was not considered in these discussions).

This paper takes these descriptions as a starting point to ask how bodies of children are seen as telegenic. I note that the deaths of children are considered suited to media attention, but more than this I explore how in the consumption of images of dead children there is a tension between the real fleshy bodies of deceased children and the symbolism of their circulation. In this article I am not undertaking a specific analysis of the images themselves nor a quantitative analysis of the volume of their reproduction. I acknowledge there is valuable work to be done in considering the specific ways in which both sets of images were circulated. Work by contributors to the volume edited by Vis and Goriunova (2015) on Kurdi's death, as well as analysis of the circulation of the images by Mortensen (2017) Olesen (2017), and Schlag (2018) offer valuable contributions in this space.

More generally, close methodological attention to the circulation and nature of images and their political consequences has been undertaken by various scholars, including Emma Hutchinson's work on the 2004 Asian Tsunami (2014); Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchinson and Nicholson on refugees in the Australian context (2013); David Campbell on the iconography of famine (2011); Sharon Sliwinski (2011); as well as work on thinking about how to consider images such as Roland Bleiker (2001, 2015), and Lene Hansen on considering international icons (2014). This article draws on these analyses in situating its frame and critique.

This paper also does not consider in detail the process of creating these images, although it acknowledges that journalistic and editorial decisions are significant in informing the presence of such images in public discourse. It does consider the editorial process briefly in the third section in relation to considerations of power relations and which bodies are shown. However, valuable reflections have been made by outlets and academics (for example Allen 2014; Laurent 2015; Peters 2015; Zelizer 2010). I also recognise the value of Roland Bleiker's clear call for a methodology of visual images and consideration of the politics of them in three spheres: the production of images, the actual content of images, and the impact of

images, each of which require a different methodological approach and driving question (2015). This paper does not take up any one particular analysis per Bleiker's schema, but I would argue this would be a fruitful line of further work stemming from the conceptual argument forwarded here.

Rather, this paper is centrally interested in the social and political questions that arise from the visibility of children's deaths in representations of conflict and crises. In this article I ask how the physical evidence of pain and death inflicted upon children as evidenced in these images challenges contemporary frameworks in which, to follow Butler, some lives are apprehendable as living and some are not. To do this, I must resist the unconscious move to default understandings of an *idea of the child* that presents itself before the specific child can be seen. I want to unpack this instinctive layering, and consider the tension between images of children and the fleshy, embodied, actual children whose bodies in death become in some way telegenic. This paper places media studies and visual politics in conversation with feminist international relations and the work of Judith Butler. It does this to offer a new way of considering the social and political impacts of images and take seriously the presence of dead bodies of children within spaces of public discourse about conflicts and crises.

To do this this article first starts by outlining how the dominant tropes of how notions of victimhood and vulnerability of children present a totalising account of children in crises and situates this paper within critiques of these limited lenses of analysis. Secondly, I argue that a consideration of dead bodies as subjects allows a meaningful consideration of the presence of these particular types of images. To do this I draw on the emerging literature within international relations on approaching dead bodies. I then turn to explore ideas of embodiment and grievability drawing on feminist international relations scholars and Judith Butler's theorisation of grievable lives. Having established this theoretical frame, in the third part of the article, I explore particular images of dead children from three positions: a discussion of the notion of icons and how children are particularly suited to virality and iconic status; an exploration of the politics of sharing images of horror and specifically dead bodies; and a consideration of race and the impact of differentiated global power relations that

allow us to see certain children's deaths and not see other bodies. Through these positions I argue that the idea of telegenic death might be considered to understand how images of children's deaths contribute to discussions of the representations and visibility of children in contexts of crisis and conflict.

Children and Global Crises

Children are receiving slow but growing attention within international relations.² What this growing literature attests to is the crucial need to attend more closely to the experiences of children in conflicts and crises. This literature is largely critical of dominant narratives about children that reduce children to a binary of victims or delinquents. Yet these narratives are pervasive and have functioned to create norms around the appearance of children in popular culture, news media, and public discourse.

This dichotomous normative framing positions children as touchstones of moral purity, of futurity, of hope; or as the damaged, violated, victims whose treatment demonstrate the amorality of a particular government or group. Their lives are imbued with innocence and passivity; they are the uncomprehending victims of violent regimes and terror (see Honwana 2006; Carpenter 2006). Children's experiences of conflict and violence are traumatic and deeply problematic; critiques of the dichotomous framing do not deny this. Rather they argue for more complex engagement to more meaningfully understand children's experiences of, and capacity to respond to, violence and conflict. Here however, I am interested in the way children are represented in general public discourse. They are rendered apolitical themselves, but their lives and bodies are politicised by others. Which children are seen, where they appear, and when they are mourned also tells us a lot about how we are to perceive a conflict or tragedy. Rarely asked to speak, their bodies become symbols of catastrophe or cruelty.

² Illustratively but not exhaustively see Beier 2015; XXXX; Watson 2009; Huyhn, d'Costa and Lee-Koo 2015; Brocklehurst 2006) Despite a growing body of work on children and youth in peace and conflict, many of these insights are still not engaged by the mainstream discourses within international relations and its related sub fields.

The appearance of children amidst global crisis and conflict can be described as a form of “child politics” that “refers to instances of politics of all kinds which pivot, in part or in total on the discursive figure of ‘the child’” (Baird 2008, 291). The ways in which children ‘appear’ are framed and deployed to engender sympathy, and in many cases to prompt donations from those seeing the image (Pupavac 2001; Burman 2008). These children are usually portrayed as an individual, decontextualised, without parents or guardians in the image; a suffering, victimised child in need of external assistance (see Burman 1994, 2008; Manzo 2008; Campbell 2011). For Erica Burman (1994, 246) this is a form of “disaster porn”, where the “spectacle of the suffering child” stands in for more complex engagement with the issue.

The concept of children which is operating in these contexts is predicated on a universalised notion of ‘the child’, which is nonetheless the product of a historical process in the Global North which sees children as innocent, dependent on adult guidance, always potentially at risk (see James and Prout 1990); a “becoming” on a teleological process to full rational adulthood (Qvortrup 1994). Childhood, it is understood, should be a time of protected, institutionalised development, under the care of adults. More than this, childhood and children “are a synecdoche for a country’s future, for the political and social well-being of a culture” (Moeller 2002, 39). Moeller (2002, 49) also argues that children have a specific function that adults cannot fulfill:

The innocent child has become the indicator species. Just as the viability of certain frog species speaks to the overall health of an ecological microclimate, the well-being of children has come to speak to the overall health of a political climate.... Their abused innocence implicitly condemns their home political environment.

Thus, when children are harmed or at risk, there is an implicit condemnation of the nation that has not done sufficient to protect their children. As a notion of childhood, emerging from the specificities of historical contexts of the Global North, becomes universalised, Vanessa Pupavac argues that a suffering child in the Global South is viewed as a “moral failing of their society” (2001, 102; see also Berents 2016). Children, in the context of crises, are rendered objects; ‘the child’, that idea of what a child should be and what this child is, speaks before the specific context and experience can be understood. They become touchstones of moral purity and their suffering can only be read as a failure of the adults that surround them.

While children are presented as decontextualised, innocent victims, their bodies are rendered politicised through the judgement that accrues to their societies, and the invisible frames that make them visible to international audiences. Moeller (2002) argues that it is not that children should not appear in media, sometimes it is crucial that their presence is acknowledged and included. However, “when the media shill their stories with wide-eyed orphans” there are consequences: “such pictures are riveting in an almost nauseous way because they eliminate the nuances, inconsistencies, and complexities that are essential components of political society” (Moeller 2002, 43; see also Burman 2008). Being critical about how and where images of children appear is crucial to consider the narratives that are circulated.

However, being critical about how and where dead children appear in particular requires considering which bodies do appear, and why, as well as which bodies are not appearing and how politics and power frame the appearance of certain bodies. These concerns will be the focus of the subsequent sections.

Confronting Corpses and the Grievability of Lives

Embodiment, Bodies, and Death

There has already been important attention to bodies in IR. Particularly in the last decade, certain scholars have done important exploratory and interrogative work about the presence of bodies, both living and dead. On the whole, this work has attended to deaths and torture in war, although work like Rosemary Shinko’s (2010) consideration of the place of “autonomous bodies” against contemporary IR scholarship’s erasure of the body explores the theoretical context of the absence of bodies. The Abu Ghraib photographs are an important site of examination about how bodies are made abject, objectified, and are inscribed with violent power relations (Dauphinee 2007, Sontag 2003, Butler 2010, 34-63). Work by Thomas Gregory looking at the so-called Afghan Kill Team of US soldiers who killed, dismembered and photographed the body of an unarmed boy, Gul Mudin, challenges the ways in which we comprehend pain and violence against the body in war (2016); while other work by Gregory on civilian deaths in Afghanistan contributes to understanding the liveability and grievability of bodies (2012). Spectacular deaths and violence has been

examined by Lauren Wilcox through close feminist attention to gendered bodies and the abject bodies of suicide bombers (2014, 2015, 80-103), while Jessica Auchter (2016a) explicitly asks about the role of dead bodies for security studies in questioning the normative violences of body counts (see also Wilcox 2015, 131-65). Much of this work with its roots in feminist theory, builds on the work Kristeva and Butler on the notion of ‘abject’ bodies, those bodies which are “cast off, away or out” (Butler 1993, 243n1) or “expelled” to claim a sense of self (Kristeva 1982, 3).³ Dead bodies, as theorized by recent work in IR, represent a form of abjected body which is constituted as distinct from the normal functioning of international politics. These close, detailed works on violence towards abject bodies and dead bodies in IR contribute much to our understanding of the politics of the body as explicit sites of analyses.

Auchter asks, in concluding comments on her essay on paying attention to dead bodies in security studies: “What can the dead body tell us about how political identity and political communities form? How do political communities decide who is worthy of securing, who is not, and who is grievable, memorializable, retrievable, and protectable; who is the referent of security?” (2016a, 48). These are important, timely questions. Auchter notes briefly that Alan Kurdi does not look like the kind of body we encounter in global security (2016b, 120) and I want to extend this in looking directly at those bodies that we might not expect to consider—those of children—but which nonetheless have always been present. In focusing on dead children’s bodies, rather than just children in distress, I follow others working in this space to argue for the importance of the corpse as a significant subject in IR. Auchter argues, “the corpse is important precisely because it is a component within cultural understandings and identity constructions. Dead bodies are personally and culturally significant to survivors: they are ‘socially alive but biologically dead’ (Sledge 2007, 21)” (2016a, 39).

³ Abject bodies are more complex than that briefly described here and abjection is an important component of considering dead bodies in IR. For further detailed engagement with the abject see Kristeva 1982 and Butler 1993; and in feminist IR see in particular Wilcox 2014, 2015.

It is important to recognise children's corpses not as an unfortunate accident of the international system, but rather a part of how the international system functions; collateral damage and death has always been a considered and assessed aspect in the conduct of conflict and international politics. While bodies are often seen failures of the system, dead children pose particular questions. Auchter explains:

[d]ead bodies are thus complex: they have both emotional and evidentiary value. They pose important questions for security frameworks, including what happens when they are thrust on the scene in a way that is unexpected or taboo (2016a, 39).

Consequently, I ask what is the “emotional and evidentiary” value of a dead child. Appearing in ways that might be considered taboo –images of dead children are not ‘meant’ to be seen as they are not ‘meant’ to occur—images of children's dead bodies as the viewer to be outraged. This prompts this article to ask why certain deaths are made visible, how they are presented as ‘evidence’, how they come to be seen and others are not.

Apprehendable Life: What Bodies Can We See

In seeing those bodies often overlooked in IR discourse, those bodies which are often constructed as the accidental tragic outcome of necessary conditions as instead a fundamental constitutive part of doing international politics, the body is not only produced but can be productive. Lauren Wilcox argues this in *Bodies of Violence* (2015, 11):

bodies must be understood as both material *and* cultural, both produced by practices of International Relations *and* productive themselves. Bodies are thus not fixed entities, but are always unstable and in the process of becoming. They are ontologically precarious, existing only in virtue of certain material/political conditions that allow them to be intelligible to others.

The conceit of much traditional IR is its wilful ignoring of the fleshy bodies the practices of state making and war create. Carol Cohn (1987) explicitly argues the absence of consideration of harm to people is required to enable nuclear strategising. More recently Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (2007), Christine Sylvester (2012, 2014), Cynthia Enloe (2014) and others, through their attention to gender, women, and diverse identities in the sphere of war, have opened space to consider embodiment seriously in IR. Inherent in this work still is choices about what bodies are made visible in discourses and practices; and still in all of them the bodies of

children and young people are not given meaningful consideration. In order to try and speak meaningfully of the visual appearance of dead bodies of children this paper turns to Judith Butler's notion of grievability.

Butler's work, particularly in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2010), gives an account of life that is precarious and vulnerable. For Butler the precariousness of bodies and life comes about as a result of "living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (2010, 14). The body "implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (2004, 26). We are vulnerable because of the "fundamental sociality of embodied life" (2004, 28), and for Butler violence is a "touch of the worst order" in that it exposes the irrevocable vulnerability of ourselves to others. However, while we all might live with this vulnerability it is worsened for some who in certain situations "especially those in which violence is a way of life, and the means to secure self-defense are limited" (2004, 29).

The grievability of a human life is also differentiated due to social and political positionalities. Butler draws attention to this difference by asking who is recognised as 'we' in a political community in a global sense: "whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable" (2010, 38; see also 2004, 32). A grievable life is one that has been lived, that can be apprehended as such, and thus grieved. Butler argues the counter to this is a life that is not grievable "because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (2010, 38). While Butler argues that it may be possible to "appeal to a 'we'" despite our different positionalities, due to the fact "all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost someone" (2004, 20); this 'we' is often constituted by exclusions, the 'we' is not seen as extending to all (2010, 37-39).⁴ Thus, life must be apprehended by

⁴ I write this article cognizant of my own positionality. Butler asks who is the "we" in a political community that determines the grievability of another life (2010: 38). The 'we' in the political community that apprehends these images and mourns the deaths of children is not a fixed entity; it is slippery and eludes pinning down. The 'we' is complicated by the global circulation of images; its contradictions are made visible when, for example, Alan Kurdi's aunt mourns him on television from

others, and others determine how and why another life is included in those whose lives are considered valuable or not.

Thus we have to ask how or why lives are apprehended as living and thus grievable or not. Wilcox argues that Butler's work explicitly outlines how our bodies are "ontologically vulnerable" (2014, 47) whereby certain lives are not considered lives at all. Thus when they are killed they are not intelligible as human at all; "[i]t is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable. Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds" (Butler, 2004, 35). Butler's work in *Frames of War* draws attention to how life is framed in particular ways that are political; "frames structure modes of recognition...but their limits and their contingency become subject to exposure and critical intervention as well" (2010, 24). Grievability is differentially distributed. Butler argues that those bodies which are "not 'regarded' as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death" (2010, 25).

In the contemporary environment we can recognise the frames that condition us to not regard certain populations as grievable: for instance those suffering individuals whose experiences and presence constitutes the Mediterranean migrant crisis, drone victims, civilians enduring Syria's civil war are constituted by frames in which their lives are not seen as grievable due to distance, otherness, and fear. Butler highlights the norms at work that permit some frames to "bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness" and others which "foreclose responsiveness" (2010: 77; see also 2004: 146). Those who are not understood as part of the "we" of the political community, those bodies which are made abject, can be subjected to violence because they are not only excluded but made "unreal" (2004, 33; see also Butler 2004, 146-149; 2010, 37-39) Wilcox (2015) argues it is here Butler's work contributes to feminist IR's attempts to centre the broken body without reproducing the body as an

her Canadian home (see also Sontag 2003, 55). I write recognizing the ways in which the 'we' is politicized and that these images are mobilized as much to Other as they are to mourn. In using 'our' and 'we' in this article I hold in tension a recognition of the flows and implications of uneven global power relations while simultaneously working from Butler's observation that all of us are vulnerable to the possibility of violence and this helps constitute a collective 'we' dependent on our fundamental sociality (2003; 2004, 29).

object. Butler's notion of normative violence, explains Wilcox, refers to violent exclusions "which not only form the body that appears to be material and complete (a 'body that matters') but also obscure this very process" (2015, 9). Some bodies are intelligible because they have complied with various bodily norms. Bodies that have been "subject to normative violence are often then subjected to the forms of violence that International Relations is more comfortable theorising" (torture, drone death, enhanced security measures and so on) (Wilcox 2015, 9; see also Zehfuss 2009). These ungrievable bodies are evident "from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others—even if it means taking those latter lives" (Butler 2010, 38).

Thus, it is evident that in the global circulation of power and privilege, and the maintenance of political norms, certain bodies are erased. Perhaps more accurately than erased, these bodies were never seen as bodies to be counted at all. However, some bodies are captured and framed through photographs and reproduced.

Framing Death, Visibility of Bodies

Having firstly contextualised the position of children in global contexts, and secondly highlighted the significance of considering dead bodies as subjects, this article now considers the conceptions of children, death, and otherness that allow the circulation of certain 'iconic' images. It draws specifically on recent examples to contextualize this conceptual contribution. If the capacity to apprehend a life as liveable, a body as grievable, is dependent on the frames by which we engage with these bodies, it is crucial to turn to the ways in which bodies are framed and appear in political discourse. As noted above, the dead bodies that have been the focus of IR theorising to date have been those which have been rendered ungrievable: torture victims in Abu Ghraib, Afghani civilians, drone victims. I am interested here in the deaths that transgress their exposure to normative violence. Palestinians are constructed as ungrievable yet Netanyahu's invocation of telegenic death raises the dead Bakr children to a form that is apprehendable and thus grievable. Mediterranean migrants died in their thousands, but Alan Kurdi's body complied with certain societal bodily

norms, most obviously his childhood and the attending assumptions, and thus was apprehendable as a “life that should have been lived” and thus grievable.

Here, this article turns to unpack three elements that contribute to an understanding of children’s dead bodies as telegenic and the consequences of such a configuration: the idea of icons and how children are particularly suited to virality; the politics of sharing images of dead bodies; and the implications of race and the impact of differentiated global power relations that allow us to see certain children’s deaths.

Images of Children’s Deaths as Icons

David Campbell (2011) talks about photojournalism as somatic, that it relies on images of individuals to convey broader social issues. These images are not simple, but rather to follow Hariman and Lucaites are the “individuated aggregate” (cited in Campbell 2011). According to this notion, images of suffering depict individuals as singular, however they “depict collective experience metonymically by reducing a general construct...to a specific embodiment...” (Campbell 2011). Such images can be referred to as ‘icons’. Hariman and Lucaites define iconic images as those that are “widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics (2007: 27). Lene Hansen also draws on Hariman and Lucaites to forward an idea of an icon; she moves their definition to the realm of the international to talk about images that are “widely circulated, recognised, and emotionally responded to” (2015, 263). Mortensen argues it is important to note that icons are not “universal” images, but rather “constructions in public discourses involving intense circulation across media platforms along with repeated statements about their iconic status...” (2017: 1144). Kurdi’s image complies with such an understanding of an ‘icon’. It has come to stand-in for the so-called ‘migrant crisis’, appearing in unrelated news stories and invoked when speaking broadly of the consequences of the crisis. If ‘international icons’ to follow Hansen, such as Kurdi’s photo, have “emotional and evidentiary power” (Auchter 2016a, 39), how might we understand the complexities of representing pain and suffering through images such as that of Kurdi’s (or the less circulated, but still

significant Bakr boys? Here I am interested in how the consumption of images functions in emotional and political terms.

There is a universalising response when confronted with images of dead children—children who already suffer in IR discourse by being rendered an abstract notion, a passive object. Sliwinski argues that (2004, 153) “to look at the photographs—because one only looks—is to become directly culpable for the erasure of the other’s singularity”. For Dauphinee there are certain instances in which an image “seems to capture a quintessential, transhistorical, collective pain, which in turns elides the specificity of the pain itself. The symbolic comes to stand in for the pain, even as it attempts to express what is *real* about pain, suffering and trauma” (2007, 146); Butler argues that a photograph, in documenting a life, “‘argues’ for the grievability of a life” (2010: 98). It is the universality of understanding of children as innocent, vulnerable victims, that means children are often found in these “certain instances” that captures a “quintessential, transhistorical, collective pain” to follow Dauphinee. Even in the moment the child is apprehended as living, and thus as mournable, they are simultaneously transmuted to a symbol. This has two interrelated effects: to move the individual death to an idea-of-a-victim, and to allow the consumer of the image to sit with a duality: a victim that is known (we have names and biographical details for the Bakr boys and for Alan Kurdi) but that stands in for broader suffering in our collective imagination.

It is, however, crucial to note that the Bakr children, as well as Alan Kurdi were only mournable in death. Their lives as children were not apprehendable as living. Moreover, their deaths only had visibility because media reproduced countless images of their dead bodies. It was the shock value of these small broken bodies that captured attention. Susan Sontag argues

the exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this [colonising] offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees (2003, 65).

This distance allows us to engage with this violence while remaining distant from it. These bodies are enough *like us* to apprehend them as living, but different enough to be made visible in ungainly spread-limbed death. Sontag argues that “the frankest representations of war, and of disaster-injured bodies, are of those who seem most foreign, therefore least likely to be known. With subjects closer to home, the photographer is expected to be more discreet” (2003: 55). Of course, images are no longer limited and directed to one audience, but circulate globally, raising questions about the privilege of assuming relatives will not encounter images of their dead loved ones. This was evidenced in Kurdi’s case when relatives in Canada gave interviews to the press in the aftermath, speaking of their distress at seeing Kurdi’s image everywhere. This tension between these images being sharable because, as ‘international icons’, they contain universalized notions, and the need to know who this child is, is an inescapable part of the politics of representing dead children. Their circulation is predicated on the elision of the specific trauma experienced by family of the dead child, which is embedded in invisible relations of power and privilege. Having established the relevance of the notion of the icon, it is these relations—the sharing of images of corpses and the visibility of certain bodies and not others—that will now be explored.

Retweeting Dead Bodies: Politics of sharing such images

Many have critiqued the growing visibility of horrific death and questioned whether we have become desensitised, less moved, by it. Henry Giroux argues that we have lost the capacity to respond politically and ethically to the violence evident within images of war (2012, 271). Sontag notes that sixty or seventy years ago there was a novelty value to photos, but now “our situation is altogether different. The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image—of agony, of ruin—is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war (2003, 21). Sontag’s views on the idea of photography as an “act of non-intervention” (1977, 11), are expanded upon but held up in her 2003 essay in which as noted, these images are unavoidable, but also this knowledge does not prompt change in addressing such horrors. Rather, photos of disaster and death are features of a “normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value” (2003, 20). The evolution of images of child ‘icons’ from those like the so-called ‘Napalm girl’ to the dead Alan

Kurdi suggests a possible shift in the kinds of images that will ‘shock’, what Elkins calls the “kitsch economy of perpetual inflation” (2001, 185) where increasingly ‘shocking’ photos are needed to “arrest attention, startle, surprise” (Sontag 2003, 20). This combined with the capacity for instantaneous and voluminous transmission of images raises questions of how iconic status, desensitization and shock interact with the bodies of children specifically in representing crises.

The circulation of ‘shocking’ images of dead children requires attention to the politics of distance. Elizabeth Dauphinee (2007, 140) poses that the

imperative to make pain visible through contemporary technologies of visual representation actually works to contain and delimit the experience of pain by locating it so firmly in the distant and disconnected bodies of others that our ability to engage is relegated to that of observation, which severely limits the possibility of making response.

However, Butler argues that the so-called ‘Napalm girl’ photo of Phan Thi Kim Phuc and others of children in Vietnam provoked outrage in the US population because they were “precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field... It was from that apprehension of the precariousness of those lives we destroyed that many US citizens came to develop an important and vital consensus against the war” (2004: 150). Butler goes on to argue for the necessity of such photos, arguing “we will not be moved” if the media does not run those pictures. Imagery, according to Dauphinee “forms our dominant medium of access to the pain of the other and already works to qualify the nature or the necessity of the pain, particularly when pain enters political space” (2007, 144). Thus, while Dauphinee is sceptical of the capacity of images to allow us a response beyond just observation, there is value in observing these images of vulnerability and pain.

So why was Kurdi apprehendable as a grievable life in the moment of his death, if such images generally do not prompt action? Gregory argues, using Cavarero’s discussion of horror, that the images of savaged bodies are horrific “not [because] our lives are reducible to our bodies, but that our bodies are what is most visibly human about us” (Gregory 2015, 952). Thus, in death the bodies of Kurdi and the Bakr boys are seen as potential human lives. Their status as children, and the assumptions that attach to children’s fleshy bodies, allow their deaths to be made apprehendable, able

to be circulated via images in tweets and news articles. In both the image of Kurdi and those of the Bakr boys, the children's bodies were still recognisable as children; they had not been subject to the deliberate maiming and violence that Gregory describes occurring to the 15-year old Afghani boy, Gul Mudin, by the so called US "Kill Team" (2015), they were not victims of a suicide bombing where their flesh was shredded and their bodies were made indistinct from all other bodies of victims (see Wilcox 2014, 2105), and their deaths were recent unlike the boy found on the Spanish beach in early 2017 (Dearden 2017). They are grievable because they are telegenic; these two notions are not distinct. Knowing that children are dying is different to *seeing* that a specific child, who is visibly a child, has died. The presence of the actual corpse is significant here in giving weight to the significance of the death; capturing the death in an image, an image of a recognizable child who has suffered the ultimate horror, allows the life-that-could-have-been to be grieved.

The Bodies That Can Be Seen: Images as Functions of Power

While children's bodies might be particularly suited to icon status, and social media virality, not every image of a dead child gains the status of icon or is even shared. There is a hierarchy of childhood is evident when we circulate, retweet, publish images of small brown bodies on the seaside. The victims that are seen to illustrate humanitarian disaster are often different looking to the predominantly white consumers of these images in the Global North (see Sontag 2003, 63-65) and such racialized dynamics are profoundly evident when it comes to images of dead children. Tanya Steele argues that "brown children matter when it is time to illustrate grief and suffering" (2014). She asks whether this "regale" of "brown dead bodies" is causing us to actually devalue these lives. Emma Hutchinson argues that photographs of disaster or crisis are saturated with colonial overtones. In discussing images of the 2004 Asian Tsunami she notes they present "deeply colonial depictions of the plight of victims... the visualization of victims as dark, primitive, and powerless" (2014, 2), that mobilize a "politics of pity" that distinguishes between those who suffer and those who do not and which is laden with power that helps "constitute hierarchical relations between the different actors" (2014, 8). Here we return to questions of lives as apprehendable as living; choices in displaying their deaths are linked to the ability to grieve them.

Kurdi's death prompted the creation of the hashtag #couldbemychild, and opinion pieces comparing Kurdi to the authors' own sons or other family members (see for example Homans 2015). Kurdi appeared enough 'like us' to be mourned. In response to the image in 2015, president of the International Rescue Committee and former UK foreign minister David Miliband said "the image resonates personally before it resonates professionally...Anyone's who got children can't help but think of the worst for the moment." (quoted in Folkenflik, 2015). Nadine El-Enany is critical of the privilege of whiteness that allowed Europeans (in her piece, but relevant more broadly) to empathise with Kurdi's image (2016). The way in which Kurdi's body conforms to certain norms within global relations of power is balanced by the fact he remains 'other' from those in the Global North. While Kurdi's tiny body lies on the shore it looks like it could be any child but it is also the fact he is Syrian, one of the thousands of bodies from the Global South trying to reach Europe, that makes his image appropriate for circulation.

The creation of these images prompts another question: if we are seeing the broken, abject, dead bodies of these children, which bodies are we not seeing? Sontag asks this question, although not specifically about children: "the pity and disgust that pictures like Hick's [images of the death of a wounded Taliban soldier in late 2001] inspire should not distract you from asking what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are *not* being shown?" (italics original, Sontag 2003, 12). The boys on the beach in Gaza made headlines because their deaths were captured by occurring next to a hotel populated by journalists. Alan Kurdi was photographed by Nilüfer Demir, a correspondent and photographer with Turkey's Dogan News Agency. However, Demir has described the beach as a 'children's graveyard' that day, with several other bodies of children lying nearby to Alan Kurdi (Walsh 2015; see also Griggs 2015). She had photographed adults who had died on the beaches after attempting to cross the Mediterranean, and she photographed the other children that day, but it was Kurdi's photo that captured the world's attention.⁵ Newsrooms around the world

⁵ Roland Bleiker notes that challenges, in considering the production of the image, include "understanding the processes through which images are produced, selected, and finally, make it into the news—from front-page coverage to television film coverage to new media sources that go 'viral' on the web." (2015, 878). He suggests methodological tools such as interviews and ethnography to

made decisions about whether to publish the image of Kurdi, just like many had made the decision a year earlier not to publish those of the Bakr children.⁶ Photojournalists and editors take and evaluate many photos of death, but only few end up on front pages of newspapers; this editorial process is full of political and ethical decisions, and have consequences for the ways in which conflicts and disaster are understood. “It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” Sontag notes (2003, 41). Butler argues that “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated” (2010, 1), they are evidence of functions of power. Thus they must be interrogated.

Butler writes (2010, 1) that “[s]pecific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are not lived nor lost in the full sense”. Those crossing the Mediterranean have been dehumanised and othered. Fear, loathing and political rhetoric of threat had meant that if those desperately seeking refuge and safety managed to arrive at Europe’s shores, if they did not die, drowning at sea in their attempt, then they are cast as other. The migrants and refugees have already been subjected to normative violence and thus are unable to be mourned, even when dying in enormous numbers. Similarly, Palestinians are ungrievable because of the discursive framings of the value of their lives that exist. Yet in death the children’s lives lost on the beaches of Gaza and Turkey are framed in a way that they become apprehendable; become, undeniably, not dehumanised and loathed.

Through the iconic status and appeals to universalizing notions of grievability of children, image of their corpses can be understood as ‘telegenic’. However, the frames that allow certain children’s deaths to be seen are predicated on and embedded within norms of uneven global power relations. These racialized and colonial frames

address these challenges, which are beyond the scope of this paper, but are important questions that should be asked in the context of the circulation of Kurdi’s image.

⁶ For overview of debate at the time about publishing the images of Kurdi see Laurent 2015. For examples of editorial statements on the publication (or not) of the image see Fahey 2015; Peters 2015; and Stead 2015.

move us between the 'we' of a political community of a life that is grievable, and the Other who can be seen and photographed in death. Children's corpses complicate understandings of grievability, their telegenic deaths are able to be retweeted and shared, but are still saturated with notions of power and privilege. Unpacking these norms make visible the frames that allow these children to come to stand in for broader understandings of conflict and disaster.

Conclusions

This article outlines an understanding of how the embodied deaths of children sit in tension with, but also facilitate, the reproduction and consumption of images of their deaths. The appearance of dead children, more than any other dead body, in international politics is indicative of a failure of the system according to traditional IR. However, there are important questions about the production of dead children as consequence of the international system. This article has outlined some key features of what an analysis of children's deaths may look like by asking what is missing in analysis of children and conflict; by considering the corpse as a significant subject; and by exploring children as 'icons', the politics of sharing such images, and the hierarchy of the visibility of these deaths. Through these steps, this article has asked why these images are considered telegenic, and how images of dead children specifically shape the "conditions of possibility" (Connolly 1991, cited in Bleiker 2014) about how we think about images in global contexts. Children cannot be ignored in analyses of global politics, and existing accounts must be expanded to consider not only their agency while alive, but their presence as mediators of understandings of conflicts and crises even in death. We must ask, seriously, how we can better theorise these deaths, and what the reproduction of such images says about global inequalities and power relations. Dead bodies must be taken seriously as political and sociological subjects.

The process of encountering, of staying with the idea of children's dead bodies as politically significant, of thinking meaningfully about their appearance, is fraught. Our ability to recognise other lives that are grievable is dependent on the fundamental

sociality of our lives as noted by Butler. This both allows us to live, but also makes us vulnerable. Butler argues

We cannot, however, will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others” (2004, 29).

Our vulnerability is predicated on our capacity to recognise others, and to mourn their deaths. The fact children’s deaths are particularly telegenic should raise questions for how we understand our relationships on a global scale, for their deaths and our lives are intricately connected and questions of security and rights and responsibility must be asked when we confront these images. If we have apprehended the Bakr boys and Alan Kurdi as grievable lives, what consequences does that have for how we think about the lives we do not apprehend? Certain children are made visible, and the fact their deaths are constructed and perceived as telegenic necessitates more critical engagement with what their appearance contributes to how dead bodies are understood in international relations theorising, and how we analyse and consider the images of their deaths in international crises.

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