On the Importance of Speaking As Well As Hearing: A Response to Swati Parashar

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On the 8th of October 2015 Swati Parashar published an article on E-IR entitled On Images, Stories, and the Need to Hear More, which engages with the politics of selective hearing, and the rush to voice our opinions on certain trending topics. It was written in the context of the unfolding debates following the picture of Aylan Kurdi, the refugee boy washed off the shores of Turkey. Parashar's suggestion is that we should speak less and hear more. I would like to offer a friendly reply to her article, for I think that while she raises a series of extremely important issues, her argument presents two main problems: it risks falling prey of intellectualism, and to provide the perfect excuse to close our eyes and pretend that nothing is happening around us.

As this is a response article, before I begin I would like to make clear that this is not a personal attack on Parashar, but a way to engage with her ideas and keep the conversation open. I would like express my respect to Parashar as an academic and human being. Her writings taught me that bodies of war know more about international relations than international relations knows of them, and her charisma is enriching to me. I had the great pleasure of listening to the power of her arguments, and the honour of talking to her and experience first person how much she cares about the politics of the everyday. Parashar has read a first draft of this critique, which was originally meant for private exchange, and encouraged me to publish it on E-IR.

I find Parashar's contribution thought provoking, and simultaneously very discomforting. I am sure that making the reader feel uncomfortable was part of the motivation that led her to write that article. I share her concern with the selective politics of images, whereby certain images are made resonant, while others remain silent in the shadow of public opinion. I admire the strength of her argument which calls on to pause, remain in silence, think, and hear.

In what follows I focus on three issues in her article that I would like to comment upon; the politics of silence, the reproduction of dualisms, and intellectualism.

The Politics of Silence

Parashar urges us all, 'academics and opinion makers included', to not say anything, but hear instead. She pungently states 'There is something narcissistic in our desire to always be "saying" something, to be telling a story, sharing an opinion, which the world simply must hear'. She suggests that *hearing*, rather than speaking for the 'oppressed' other, is the way to 'create the discursive space where various others may exist'. She propels a politics of silence.

Her problem with speaking out seems to be twofold. On the one hand, she seems frustrated with the narcissism of speaking at all costs. This, she argues, is facilitated by the social media environment, which creates space for 'self-important opinion, shame, pain, and grief'. The need to speak up for Parashar is part of the neo-liberal economy of desire to feel good as good-doers. On the other hand, she remarks Spivak's (1993) point about the ability of the subaltern to speak. The danger of telling stories is the perpetual possibility to manipulate the agency of the person who is represented, with bad outcomes.

Both these points are taken. With this said, the politics of silence is ambivalent as Kyle Grayson (2010) tells us. Silence can be a noun, and a verb. As a noun, in academia silence is valued as that space that is identified to make a meaningful contribution to knowledge. Academics are encouraged to fill up spaces of silence. To fill a space of silence is to bring a voiceless issue to the attention of a public (academic or non-). Obviously, filling this silence is not a value-free exercise. There is a politics to it, which calls for the researcher to exercise responsibility. Similar lines of thought can be applied outside of academia when speaking about taboo topics for instance. As a verb, 'to silence' is an act of power, even domination maybe, which is not foreign to the practices of academic knowledge production. When knowledge production trespasses disciplinary boundaries, knowledge is likely to be silenced. Outside of academia similar dangers exist. The work of Judith Butler (1993, 1999) on the intelligibility of gender and sexuality teaches us so. Certain topics are silenced because they are unintelligible to prevailing social norms.

With this is mind the following considerations are in order. It is true and frustrating that the sharing of images of suffering on social media change little, generate time-specific reactions, and often people do so only to feel good with themselves. But are we really in the position to dismiss the possibilities that talking about and sharing certain images might open? Are we willing to dismiss the fact that these acts of maybe 'slackivism' have created space for debates, engagement, and lobbying? Do we want to silence the fact that there has been a growing mobilisation on the part of citizens across countries to lobby their governments to react to the humanitarian crisis around migration that is unfolding in Europe and elsewhere? Are we willing to forget and silence the politics of everyday resistance? Do we want the verb to take over the noun?

Read through this framework of the politics of silence, images of refugees are maybe filling a gap of knowledge, knowledge that we would probably not know if not for those images. I agree that telling these stories via our social media platforms has the pretention of speaking for someone who cannot speak for themselves – while simultaneously feeding our ego as good-doers. Somewhere else I called this the inherent violence of images, for in the image 'the voice of the person represented is muted in favour of the power that the viewer gains to interpret the image as they please and within the cultural and social registers they have'. As Grayson (2010: 1010) says,

culture, discourse, and language have a fundamental influence over what can be thought, what can be understood, the construction of meaning, and what can be considered possible, which all in turn shape practice.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, as Parashar points out, the image of Aylan Kurdi moved so many in the west and not only. He was and could not be 'othered' in that image; he could have been the child of anyone in the west. Parashar laments that the effect of this, however, is that the subject who can be othered is removed from the structure of feeling of sympathy and pity in which the image of Aylan Kurdi has been placed. Consequently, this subject is silenced and made invisible.

This should invite us to think about the politics of emotions and the relation between self and other. Rather than shutting down the conversation, it should encourage us to keep the conversation alive and ongoing. Changing the structures of feelings should become a top priority, rather than censoring images or silencing public responses to them. Obviously, there are power relations at play, as to who has the power to change the structures of feelings and on what terms. We, as analysts, should focus on those.

Butler (2009) teaches us that certain bodies are grievable because they are considered human. What makes bodies human? Death is a very human condition, it is actually what defines us as humans rather than gods. If it is what it takes to make bodies count as human, it should not be concealed, silenced, or censored on discourses of 'trauma porn' – a discourse that compares the pleasure of watching human suffering to that of watching porn, which moralises on the rhetoric of sinful sex, and is embedded in the religious thinking that takes death to be sacred compared to life. In the face of possible criticisms the question is, why can we represent life but not death? Is it a question of ethics or of morals? I would say the latter.

An important lesson that I take from new materialism, actor-network-theory, and affect theory and deleuzian feminism is that we are what we encounter. Nothing is essential, all is procedural. Moralism and universalism are taken over by ethico-political questions of reimaging the future differently. Therefore, withdrawing images on the ground that it is

trauma porn prevents new discourses and narratives – material semiotics – to emerge from the encounter. The durability of these discourses is a different matter. Preventing the encounter also prevents the politics of thinking differently. New material semiotics are aborted in favour of moralism.

While I do not agree with the means that Parashar proposes, I share the message that she is launching. We need to create space for the other to exist, as she says, 'where various others may exist'. She asks 'why every tragedy must be a visual spectacle before we "feel" anything'? She contends that this is because of the limitations of our moral imagination which needs constant visual reminders. As a response to this, I would argue that we are embodied beings, as such I am not surprised that we need constant bodily stimuli to remind us what pain is. We sense pain, as well as we sense joy; moralising them is an abstraction that does not pass the test of time. It is not a limitation of our moral imagination, it is that moral imagination is disembodied. As sensing bodies, we need bodily reminders.

Dualisms

The second point of Parashar's article I would like to reflect upon is dualisms. She suggests that we hear more and speak less in order to create the time and space to hear and think about what would otherwise have gone unheard. I agree with the need to hear more, but I would not necessarily put it in antagonistic opposition to speaking. Because, while hearing counters the problems associated with silence as a verb, speaking feels the gap left by silence as a noun. The two should be thought of as a continuum.

The other dualisms that Parashar's article seems to posit are those between reality and representation, and speaker and spoken upon. She says, 'There is something inherently amoral about this desire to construct reality only through its representations; it prevents us from looking beyond the spectacle and hearing beyond our immediate surroundings'. And expressing what seems deep frustration she continues,

I am tired of telling and hearing stories that are more about the storytellers' self-righteousness, less about the subject of the stories… Telling stories "objectifies" people as we interpret events around them.

In an attempt to unpack her claim about the construction of reality through representations, I keep on thinking that a politics of affect rather than representation is required for a politics of difference to emerge. However, I am stuck in the idea that representations are not necessarily something else than reality. They are part of reality, they are part of the process that constructs narratives of reality. Representations are material semiotics, they are not merely narratives or imaginations.

Similarly, I find it difficult to mark a demarcation line between the speaker and the spoken upon. I would argue that this demarcation is an analytical move that does not stand the test of real social interactions. While there are strong power relations in place, we need to remember that the spoken upon has agency as well. Elsewhere I argued that images are inherently violent because they suck the voice of the subject, shifting agency from the subject represented to the viewer, who acquires the power to interpret. The subject of the image becomes object of vision and of interpretation. This objectified subject loses the power to answer back, contextualise, and make their own narrative. Representations are virtually inescapable, a fact that reminds the ambivalence of bodies, which are both subjects and objects at the same time. This condition of ambivalence means that power relations are in constant negotiation, thus blurring the dualism between reality and representation, speaker and spoken upon.

Instead of approaching the issue of representation and speaking for/back, an important question to bear in mind is the question of *cui bono*? Who or what is the representation serving? What reality does an image aim at constructing? Can we make a story heard in the hope of changing one's person mind, help them reflect, start a dialogue, or as Parashar puts it, 'create the discursive space where various others may exist?' While I agree with Parashar's warning about the perils of telling stories, I think that telling stories is the only way to start a dialogue and possibly create a politics of difference. Is it too bad to have multiple short love affairs with images, if this is a way of growing, debating, and knowing? What is left to us if not the possibility to know, try to understand, try to connect? And, what is wrong to use images if this is what it takes to move people, to activate the sensorial reminders that make 'the other' likewise human?

There is an intrinsic danger in Parashar's critique of social media and visual politics, as well as suggestion to hear more and speak less: it may provide for the perfect excuse to close our eyes and pretend nothing is happening. With this concern in mind, I rather see people talking.

As Haraway (1997), among others, remind us, knowledge is made in the material semiotic meaning-making processes, where interactions between human and non-human bodies occur and function as the foundational pillar for narratives and discourses to emerge. What if, then, we take 'social media philanthropy', as Parashar calls it, or otherwise the compelling desire to share and talk and give an opinion, as a form of knowledge production? While I share Parashar's frustration with the speed compelling stories wash away in the age of social media, I would not impose silence on it on the basis of this. What if we understand the sharing of these stories, the spectacle of pain, as Parashar called it, as a form of knowledge, as a noun 'silence' that has been named and thus given voice?

Intellectualism

The third point is intellectualism and the power relations between the researcher and the researched. Asking people to remain silent is in fact an act of intellectualism, especially in light of the right academics abrogate to make academic careers on human sufferings and disasters. While I think that Parashar's plea falls prey of this, I would like to point to another relevant example. When I read Megan MacKenzie's contribution on the Duck of Minerva titled 'Image Voyeurism, Trauma Porn, and 'Doing Something'… for Yourself' my frustration was deep. She says 'I would rather people- quite frankly- do nothing, than circulate an image or share a story of Alyan or any asylum seeker for their own personal gratification'. She calls this 'trauma porn', which she defines as the act of 'look[ing] at 'terrible' images so that we can shock ourselves, and then enjoy the feeling that washes over us as we look away and get back to our lives.' She concludes saying,

To "do" something political requires 1) engaging/reflecting on the politics of the image, the family and community it represents, and where we are positioned in relation to that family and community 2) asking ourselves how we benefit from borders, immigration quotas, policies that strip asylum seekers and relabel them 'unskilled' migrants or refugees + seeking ways that we can change our behaviors (not just our taxable donations).

There is a frustrating and problematic classist intellectualism that underpins this sort of argument. Rather than prising people for mobilising in a world where political disengagement is pervasive, intellectuals feel the need to attack them, silence them, tell them how wrong what they do is. Let alone the association to porn, which reinforces the idea that all porn is necessarily bad and degrading. Porn is for the masses, the lower classes. Upper classes have escorts, or otherwise sophisticated analyses of images of death. Academics are justified in the making of their careers on analyses of the suffering of others, mostly made from the comfort of our offices. We do not engage in porn; why should we if we have first class escorts? Are we really willing to forget the struggle of those sex workers who fight to have their labour recognised? What is the bad that is done by the appropriation of the porn terminology in the context MacKenzie uses it? Should we ask why the porn industry is so difficult to reform? Should we maybe question the context in which bad porn is produced rather than silence porn and sex workers altogether? Should we maybe look to fill the gaps of silence rather than create more silence? Before speaking as pompous academics, we should probably consider the power relations between researcher and researched, and acknowledge them.

Conclusion

As a way of concluding, I would like to make explicit why I think it is important to speak as much as it is to hear. As I previously mentioned, speaking and hearing are not necessarily opposite terms. They both are part of the politics of silence and its ambivalence. Similarly, feminist scholars have taught me that the dualism between researcher and researched is fictitious. Speaking is a fundamental term of a debate, a way to bring silence to voice. Speaking is part of the interacting process that creates meanings and forges connections.

In a famous article Steve Smith (2004) questions what is the role of IR academics in the road that led to 9/11. His position is that thinking international relations from a scholarly perspective is, in fact, doing international relations. Being IR scholars or students means that we have foreclosed the possibility of being neutral observers of world

politics (ibid. 504). As I read this, reality is performative; we make the world we live in by 'singing it into existence', that is, by talking about it. Parashar herself makes a similar point when, somewhere else, she argues that,

International relations pretends to be the innocent bystander that chooses not to know these people whose knowledge and experience would dismantle the edifice of war theorizing, a popular scholarly activity of IR. (Parashar, 2013: 618)

I would extend this beyond the IR scholar, especially in the age of social media, where intimacy is 'public intimacy' for everyone to hear and share (Berlant, 1997).

What I take from these arguments is twofold. Politics and international politics is dirty business, as Smith (2004) suggests, and whether we get involved in it through political activism or scholarly research, there is no way we can avoid the problem of dirty hands. Secondly, as much as we try, there is no such thing as value-free research. There is no way we can avoid the power relations between the researcher and the researched. But what we can do is acknowledge our positionality in the research. At best we can engaged with the lived experience of the researched, and tell their stories through our writings, thus accomplishing the political goal of telling stories. Telling stories is important not only because it is the primary means through which we make sense of the world (Wibben, 2011), but also because it is a way of giving voice to a story that might be otherwise mute.

As a final word, rather than condemning the circulation of certain images on the ground of trauma porn, we should engage in understanding the structures of feelings that make them circulate, and a resource that might prove helpful – and has probably been overlooked – in this regard is Kuntsman and Karatzogianni (2012),*Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotions: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*.

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