



Theologizing on the Arts: The Photo of the Child and Vulture

Delfo C. Canceran, O.P.

It is the duty of intellectuals to commit suicide as a class.

– Che Guevara

This essay provides a preliminary sketch in doing a systematic theology on the arts. The art work like the picture of the child with the vulture cannot be framed by theologian because one needs to consider the triadic relationship exhibited in the photo between the photographer, the child with the vulture and the viewers who are trying to capture the incident by their own impression. However, by putting them together in the event surrounding the photo, the art work overflows with significations that can never be closed and totalized. Theologians can only make a provisional or tentative analysis of the photo. A theologian viewing the photo can only utter a “perhaps” in theologizing on the arts because it humbles him/her to accept his/her vulnerability and finity in theologizing.

Keywords: *arts, photo, theologizing, theologian, sign, other*

Introduction

In this paper, we shall focus on triad network of art namely, the artist who committed suicide, the picture depicting the starving child chased by a vulture and the viewers who were shocked by the photo. Oftentimes, the discourse on arts merely zeroes in on art as a work crafted by an artist. In this sense, art is conceived as a mere product. This productionist conceptualization cuts off the art

from its milieu or network of relationship and thereby reduces it to a work as an independent or separate product.¹

Hence, this paper attempts to address and rectify this lopsided treatment of art by intertwining the triad of the artist, the photo and the viewer which are interlaced in a web of relationship. Moreover, this paper essays also to show the intersection of esthetics and ethics in the discourse on the arts. Esthetics is not only an art for its own sake, but it is deeply embedded in an ethical relationship. We shall employ the philosophies of Freud on suicide, Levinas on the other and Lyotard on unpresentability. The conclusion will use Derrida's undecidability in theologizing on arts. The intertwinement of these discourses provides us a comprehensive picture on the dialectics of esthetics and ethics.

The Photographer Kevin Carter²

As a photojournalist, the artist Kevin Carter has witnessed the horrifying inhumanity of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the terrifying violence of discrimination of the niggers and the appalling poverty of the Sudanese people, to name a few. By witnessing these scenes, he was deeply affected and was eventually disturbed by them. Kevin questioned these appalling situations but he failed to change them. Deep inside him, he sympathized with the victims but he also felt helpless and feeble to resist these evils around him. In fact, he cannot even defend and rescue that single child.

In 1993, Carter travelled to Sudan to cover this poverty-stricken country. Upon arriving in Sudan, he immediately snapped photos of famine victims. In that open bush, he saw a tiny child who was huddling on the ground and moving towards the feeding center. As he crouched to photograph her, a vulture landed near the child lurking and preying her. Silently, he intuitively positioned himself for the best possible shot. Afterwards, he was depressed thinking of this miserable child remembering her own daughter out of wedlock. That identification between the Sudanese child and his own daughter depressed him so intensely. Eventually he sold the photo to the New York Times which published it in 1993.

In May 1994, Carter fortunately received the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography with his photo taken in Sudan depicting the starving child being stalked by the awaiting vulture. Although this prize provided him applause and recognition, he was, in fact, deeply troubled and bothered with pain and agony in his heart. The prize is questioned by his conscience since he abandoned the child who was dying of hunger and who was chased by an equally hungry vulture. He failed to rescue the child

¹ See Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1992.

² For the biography of Kevin Carter, see Chicago Tribune, "The Death of Kevin Carter and One Indelible Image," August 15, 2006; Scott Macleon, "The Life and Death of Kevin Carter," Time, September 12, 1994.

from impending death. He was either so preoccupied by his craft of photography or his own troubled life. He felt so hopeless in rescuing the child from danger.

Unable to come to terms with his depression and frustration, he thought of ending his life. Just two months after receiving that award, Carter committed suicide. He parked his pickup car in a suburb near a small river where he used to play as a child. He attached a garden hose to the exhaust pipe and funneled the fumes inside the car. He was dead of carbon-monoxide poisoning at the age of 33. In his suicide note, he says:

I'm really, really sorry. The pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist...depressed ... without phone ... money for rent ... money for child support ... money for debts ... money! ... I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain ... of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners...

In this suicide note, Carter revealed his pain and depression saying that he was broke unable to finance his needs and haunted by vivid memories of hunger and murder. The reason for his suicide is manifold and complex. But one of them was the misery of the child that he personally witnessed. Carter did not enjoy the Pulitzer Prize for his photo. He regretted for his inaction or indifference to the plight of the child. Consumed with the violence he had witnessed around and haunted by the fate of the child, he then committed suicide.

The Emaciated Child

The starving child represents the poverty in Sudan. Poverty is such a complex discourse that we may simply attribute it to mere loss of jobs and lack of opportunity as the main culprits. Without job and education, the person is deprived in satisfying his/her basic needs and pursuing his/her careers. However, this analysis fails to consider the structural arrangement of the international economy brought about by the market liberalization and global consumerism.

We can consider the child as a concrete representation of the violence of poverty inflicted on third world economies which are languishing in starvation brought about by the global impact of economic injustice. In taking the picture, Carter may have been moved by his profession as a photojournalist photographer and not by his compassion to the victim as a cosmopolitan citizen. Perhaps, at that juncture, he was confused on what to prioritize – whether to rescue the child or to take a shot. He chose to take the picture and sold it to the New York Times.

There were conflicting versions on his reaction to the child stalked by the vulture. One version would say that he just sat under the tree and smoked a cigarette while reflecting on his action that perhaps bothered him due to his indifference.

Another version would tell that after shooting the scene, he rescued the child by chasing away the vulture. However, he did not carry the child to the feeding center to rescue her. There remains a distance erected between the subject as the photographer and the object of his photography.

The Viewers around the World

When the photo was published and released, many viewers around the world were shocked in seeing it. They were in chorus in asking: What happened to the child? They accused Kevin of being indifferent and selfish due to his inaction to the urgency of the situation. This observation may be right in reference to the actual event that befell the child. However, that photo taken by Carter opened the eyes of the world to the pernicious effect of poverty in third world countries. We did not know what actually happened to the child, but through this picture, people were moved to pity. Thus, the photo ignited humanitarian efforts to donate food to the famine-stricken Sudan.

To satisfy the curiosity of the viewers, the New York Times ran a special editorial note explaining the context surrounding the life of Carter as a photojournalist. There was both admiration and condemnation of the viewers to Carter. He was admired because of his craftsmanship in taking photo that moved the hearts of the people around the world in exposing the despicable situation of Sudan. But he was also condemned because despite the miserable situation of the child, he failed to rescue her from hunger by bringing her to the feeding center. In fact, Carter was likened to the vulture: "The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene." Although we do not know the fate of the child, the legacy of the photography is a remembrance to the misery in the world.

The Theology of a Theologian

I believe that to theologize on the photograph is to take a vista of the situation and to expand one's horizon. A theologian is like as photographer, s/he takes a position and shots the scene. In a way, theologian photographs an event by picturing it. In theologizing, a theologian reduces the event into a photo by focusing on a particular aspect. S/he frames it the way s/he prefers it. However, she can also magnify the photo by imagining it in relation to the bigger picture or recontextualizing it in a different situation. That connection is very crucial in understanding the photo. Through connection, the photo expands imaginatively and unexpectedly. In this sense, we cannot strictly put a limit or frame on the photo.

In the book, *The Community of the Beautiful*, the author focuses on aesthetics of the beautiful defined as the appealing and the attractive to the viewers.³ Although

³ Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999).

his theology mentions the ugly face of poverty that needs liberation, it does not constitute a major theme in his arguments. The theologian as a photographer focuses on the beautiful and glosses over the ugly. In short, s/he foregrounds the beautiful. However, as theologians, we are confronted by the questions of the ugliness of the situation as depicted by the photo. In that photo of a starving child stalked by a vulture, we are faced with the depression of the artist leading to his suicide, the destitution of the impoverished child starving to death and the shock of the viewers seeing the photo. This triad of the artist, the photo and the viewer will preoccupy this discussion.

1. *On Suicide*

Let me begin with suicide. For Freud, suicide is an exit or an end to psychic conflict generated by a deep-seated internal split or division in the ego.⁴ This internal split or division is brought about by the relationship between the ego and the object. That relationship is characterized by ambivalence – a love-hate feeling. In the case of Carter, he was bothered by many events since his life was messy and a wreck. He bounced from romance to romance, fathering a daughter out of wedlock and was financially broke since he had no stable job and income to support his daughter. Thus, money and love deeply troubled him. He loved his profession and his daughter but he was always struggling to meet both ends.

In this internal conflict, the individual experiences depression due to loss of a love-object – his work and his daughter. In response, the individual copes with this loss through mourning. However, the individual did not really lose the love-object but only internalizes or introjects it, becoming a part of the ego. In integrating the love-object into the ego, he is internally split or divided because the ambivalent feeling of love-hate relationship is also internalized or introjected in him.⁵

However, Carter cannot openly express his hatred to the object so he transforms his hatred to himself since the object has been internalized or introjected through self-censure or self-harm leading to his final fate- suicide. For Freud, the aggression is directed solely to the self so that his relationship with the object is not threatened but sustained. In short, aggression must be displaced to the self so that the harmony between the self and the object is maintained.

In the case of the photo, his relationship to the child is characterized by ambivalence: he wanted to help her but he was disabled to help. This ambivalence is

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Standard Edition, vol. 13 (London: Hogarth, 1917); Sigmund Freud, *Morning and Melancholia*, Standard Edition, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1917).

⁵ For interpretations on suicide, see Heinz Henseler, "The Psychology of Suicide," in *Suicide and the Right to Die*, Concilium vol. 179 no. 3 (1985), 21-28; Robert W. Firestone, *Suicide and the Inner Voice: Risk Assessment and Case Management* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 59-67; J. Mark G. Williams and Leslie R. Pollock, "The Psychology of Suicidal Behavior," eds. Keith Hawton and Kees van Heeringen (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, LTD., 2000), 79-94.

intensified when he proximately identified the Sudanese girl with his own daughter. He saw in the struggling girl his own abandoned daughter. His relationship with his daughter is marked by ambivalence. He wanted to help his own daughter but since he was broke, he was unable to help her. Moreover, his daughter is also a symptom to him since she reminds him of his responsibility as a father for support but since he was bankrupt, he was guilty of abandonment. In fact, he was ashamed to return home.

However, Carter did not lose his daughter. He merely internalized his daughter. His hatred is not really directed to his daughter but to himself whom he accused of irresponsibility. Thus, in committing suicide, he maintained his relationship with his daughter whom he longed to embrace. Freudian psychoanalysts explain that his mixed feelings of abandonment, helplessness and hopelessness as well as the feelings of guilt, rage and anxiety can intensely trouble a person leading to suicide. Thus, Carter's suicide is unconsciously an expression of a symbolic unity with the child as an object-love which represents his daughter and metaphorically substituted with the Sudanese girl having similar destitute fate. Unable to come to terms with these feelings, he ended his life. In this perspective, suicide is a cry of pain.

Consciously, suicide is indeed an act of self-destruction, but unconsciously, suicide is a flight into a condition of rest, comfort, freedom, harmony and ecstasy, indeed even triumph of the person. In theoretical terms, suicide is a regression into the earlier form or stage in a relation of harmonious fusion with the object. When Carter decided to commit suicide, he went back to his childhood days by visiting the place where he used to play as a growing boy reminiscing his joyful days. According to Freud, the death-drive (*thanatos*) resembles the life-drive (*eros*) since the end (goal) of pleasure is a repose, as death is also repose. By returning to his boyhood, Carter tried to restore the earlier stage of his life (4-8).

The object (his own daughter metaphorically substituted by the Sudanese girl) reveals not merely the real destitution of the child but also a substitute for Carter's own real situation. Thus, the child and Carter resemble in their misery. He was paralyzed in responding since he saw himself in that destitution. Unable to respond to the child, he hated himself for his incapacity. His frustration was turned to an aggression not to the child but to himself. The aggressive side of this ambivalent relationship (hatred) turns against the self. Psychoanalytically, suicide represents an unconscious hostility towards the self since the object is already internalized or interjected as an ambivalent love-object.

2. *On the Child*

In terms of Carter's relationship with the suffering child, Levinas argues that the Other is a trauma or a shock where the individual begins to think. That scene in the photo becomes a question or a problem to Carter giving him something to think. In the face of the suffering Other, the individual gropes for answers. Although

the child huddled on the ground, her face can partly be seen and imaginatively constructed. The face of the child reveals her naked destitution being exposed to the vulture and menaced by death.

In Levinasian ethics, subjectivity is defined not in terms of rationality but of responsibility. In short, the self is defined in relation to the Other. That relationship is marked by or tied with responsibility. This responsibility is a responsibility not for the self but for the Other because it comes from the Other and not imposed by the self to the Other.⁶ Thus, the relationship of the self to the Other is ethical: the face speaks to one and calls one to a responsibility. However, Carter did not heed the call of the child since he was blind or callous to her need. He failed to respond to the Other. After taking the picture, he began to reflect on his action or inaction. In confronting the Other, the self is awakened or jolted by the Other.

Moreover, responsibility to the Other is incumbent on the self. In short, the Other orders the self to respond. In this sense, the relationship between the self and the Other is asymmetrical since the self is subjected to the Other or the self assumes the status of hostage.⁷ Although there is a distance that separated Carter the photographer and the child the object of his photography, the self from the Other, the Other calls the self to a responsibility. The proximity of the Other is presented to the self as the Other appeals to the self to a responsibility (96). It is the self who should support and rescue the Other. That responsibility is nontransferable or nonsubstitutable.

Theologically, the face of the Other leads us to think beyond. In the face of the Other, there is certainly an access to God.⁸ The face signifies the Infinite since the face of the Other cannot be contained and grasped.⁹ The face of the Other reveals the trace of God. Since the Other exceeds, there is an opening beyond what is delimited. This opening is the manifestation of the Infinite. However, this manifestation is not disclosure but a call to responsibility: When there was reflection on his action or inaction, Carter talked to God by questioning himself on what he failed to do. In responsibility, the individual is called by God to respond to the Other. The self would say to the Other: *Here I am*. This *Here I am* testifies to the beyond the face of the Other. By saying *Here I am*, the individual recognizes his/her responsibility to the Other incumbent on him/her. The response of the self to the Other remains wanting or lacking since the Other is infinite. The self cannot catch up but only makes a witness. The glory of the Infinite reveals itself through what it is capable of doing in the witness.¹⁰ In the responsibility for the Other, one is, in the final analysis,

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 95.

⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰ Ibid., 109.

responsible for the death of the Other. The dying Sudanese girl is appealing: Do not allow me to die; rescue me from death. The fear for the death of the Other is certainly at the basis of the responsibility for him.¹¹

3. *On the Shock*

The shock experienced by the viewers was directed to the plight of the starving child. Moved by that scenario, the viewers immediately asked: What happened to the child? They wanted to know the fate of the child by asking a teleological question: Did he survive? They immediately link the emaciated girl with unbearable hunger: Was the child able to eat? Having defined the situation, the viewers sent food for the starving Sudanese people for them to survive. They did not just define their needs but also want to end their need. The signifier (child) is immediately and finally signified (hunger) by the viewers capturing and fixing the sign (food). They immediately linked the child with hunger so they sent her food.

However, in Lyotard, the child is a sign of history.¹² As a sign, the child is a mere substitute for she cannot be presented as such. In other words, the child is unrepresentable. Being unrepresentable, viewers could not define the child by objectifying her. Nonetheless, they could always witness to the inhumanity of poverty among the impoverished people around the world. This inhumanity cannot just be defined by poverty. It can be the case that goes beyond poverty such as the experience of discrimination or racism of colored and impoverished people around the world.

Just like Levinas, Lyotard says that the photo in its contextual consideration gives an object for thought. When we speak of the photo, we immediately link it with its context to establish its legitimacy and validity. Thus, the photo was taken in a poverty-stricken Sudan. Hence, the photo is linked with some phrases that we want to relate or connect. The child in the photo is linked with hunger and food. In that case, we determine that photo by means of some judgments.

For Lyotard, the shock generated by the photo is sublime. According to Lyotard, it is not the photo that is named sublime but the mind provoked by the photo. The idea of poverty is infinite but imagination attempts to catch up by providing a definitive presentation of it. However, the imagination fails to provide a presentation but still imagination is forced to provide a suitable presentation.¹³ The imagination tries to stretch itself out just to present the object. That attempt to present the object by stretching up the imagination is both a source of joy and pain. In other words, the object is apprehended as sublime with a joy which is only made possible by the mediation of pain. The imagination cannot manage to present an object which could validate or realize the idea. Thus, the individual experiences pain from an inability

¹¹ Ibid., 118-119.

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Sign of History," in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington and Robert Young, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 162-180.

¹³ Ibid., 171.

to present. Nonetheless, the individual discovers not only the infinite scope of the idea, which is incommensurable with any presentation, but also the vocation of the subject, the calling, to supply a presentation for the unrepresentable. The imagination is required to go beyond anything that can be presented.¹⁴

To present an abstract presentation of the idea, the imagination is tasked to delimit itself. The sublime is an affective paradox, the paradox of objectification (making an object) and nothingness (no object to present it). In this paradox, the sublime constitutes an “as if” presentation of the idea where there can be no such objective presentation of the sublime. Thus the sublime remains a sign.¹⁵ As a sign, it liberates judgment from overarching criterion. This judgment without criterion of finality and enclosure means that the sign is not tied to an idea of a single purpose, but to a formation of free exploration of ideas in the plural leading to the infinity of heterogeneous finalities.¹⁶

The Undecidable Theologizing

How do theologians theologize on the arts based on the triadic relation of the artist, the work and the spectator?

We have to consider that this triadic relation is complex since it is replete with ambivalence in reference to the experience of the artist (Freud), alterity in reference to the child (Levinas) and unrepresentability in reference to the viewer (Lyotard). Viewing this complexity from a Derridian perspective, the theologian is placed in what is called undecidability. The theologian is confronted by the singularity of the situation such as the photo taken by Carter in Sudan which generated shocks among the curious viewers. The theologian cannot totally comprehend the network involved in the art. We are trying to make sense of the photo but it escapes our grasp. Thus we cannot (en)close the art.

We have to understand that undecidability is not the incapacity to decide but rather the ability to invent decision. When we look at the picture, we are tempted to define it without considering the complexity of the situation of the artist, the child and the viewer. We may immediately recourse to our previous knowledge and readily apply it to the new situation. In that case, there is strictly no decision because we merely rely on the past and use it to the present. There is a gap that separates the past and the present. To relate the gap, we have to undergo the ordeals of making a new decision of the unique situation. New decision must come from the consideration of the singular situation which does not fit with the established program and calculation of our previous knowledge. Theologians are obliged to account for their decision on a unique situation.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 172.

¹⁵ Ibid., 176.

¹⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” in *Deconstruction*

Moreover, undecidability is not merely the oscillation between two options. In fact, undecidability is a deconstructive attempt to trouble dualism. The undecidable is something that cannot conform to either polarity or dichotomy (such as past/present, inside/outside). In making decision on a singular situation, it is not enough to look back on the past and rely on it for resource or guidance. It should also consider the uniqueness of the situation because there is something new in the present that is unforeseen by the past. It would be unfair to rely on the past in deciding on the present. To give justice to the photo in relation to our theologizing in different situations and contexts, we need to undergo the ordeals of decision making. The linkages that we make or connect with the photo may tempt us to enclose and finalize it. However, this is unjust because when we make decision, we should not just base on the program or calculation of the past but on the singularity of the new situation. Thus, a decision will never come to a final end, but will always be open for the Other who calls us to responsibility.

Conclusion

In the caption, Che Guevarra avers that it is the duty of the intellectuals as a class to commit suicide. I am taking suicide not in its literal sense but in its symbolic sense. We need to subject our knowledge to questioning so that it will not rest or stagnate. We need to do theology by exploring and experimenting on new terrains.¹⁸ According to Freud, the death drive is the source of creativity whereby the intellectual can create new ideas and frameworks that can address the new situation since s/he is not hindered by criteria or norm.¹⁹ Thus, theologians as an intellectual class should commit suicide symbolically by always inventing and creating ideas and frameworks that are responsive to the present and the future for the sake of the Other. ■



Delfo C. Canceran is a Dominican priest of the Order of Preachers and is the Commissioner of Justice, Peace and Care of Creation (JPCC) of the Dominican Province of the Philippines. He obtained his PhD/SThD at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium and studied his PhD in Sociology at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. He is teaching at the Ecclesiastical Faculties of the University of Santo Tomas and Department of Theology and Religious Education of the De La Salle University, Manila. He can be contacted at delfocanceran@yahoo.com.

and the Possibility of Justice, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24-26.

¹⁸ See Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ See Robert Rowland Smith, *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 1-25.