

# Image, Touch, Possibilities A Photograph from the 2013 Bulgarian Protests Travels the World

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Article abstract

This paper follows the lives of a photograph, which captured an unlikely gesture amidst a scene of injury during the 2013 mass protests in Bulgaria. It tracks the image's impacts by focusing on six different registers: the ethnographer, the photographer, the girl in the photograph, a blogger and participant in the protests, global image-sharing sites, and a Hollywood production. The writing strives toward an attunement with the affective force of the image and toward making visible some of the ways it manages to disrupt and reconfigure existing worlds, brighten atmospheres and lives, and create desire and anticipation for a world-in-common.

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# Image, Touch, Possibilities

## A Photograph from the 2013 Bulgarian Protests Travels the World

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**Abstract:** This paper follows the lives of a photograph, which captured an unlikely gesture amidst a scene of injury during the 2013 mass protests in Bulgaria. It tracks the image's impacts by focusing on six different registers: the ethnographer, the photographer, the girl in the photograph, a blogger and participant in the protests, global image-sharing sites, and a Hollywood production. The writing strives toward an attunement with the affective force of the image and toward making visible some of the ways it manages to disrupt and reconfigure existing worlds, brighten atmospheres and lives, and create desire and anticipation for a world-in-common.

**Keywords:** Image; protests; Bulgaria; the political; hope; attunement; imagination; the poetic; the possible

**Résumé:** Cet article suit les vies d'une photographie qui a capturé un geste improbable au milieu d'une scène de blessures pendant les manifestations de masse de 2013, en Bulgarie. Il suit les impacts de l'image en se concentrant sur six registres différents: l'ethnographe, le photographe, la fille sur la photographie, un blogueur et un participant aux manifestations, les sites mondiaux de partage d'images et une production hollywoodienne. L'auteur s'efforce de s'accorder avec la force affective de l'image et de rendre visible certaines façons dont elle parvient à perturber et à reconfigurer les mondes existants, à égayer les atmosphères et les vies, et à susciter le désir et l'anticipation d'un monde en commun.

**Mots-clés:** Image; protestations; Bulgarie; politique; espoir; harmonisation; imagination; poétique; possible

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## Image, Touch, Possibilities: A Photograph from the 2013 Bulgarian Protests Travels the World

The creases in the heavy, ripstop fabric of his uniform are what capture and hold my attention. There, right around his shoulders where two pieces of material are stitched together, her delicate fingers have dug deep into the resistant textile, pushing it next to his skin. Tips of small fingers disappear into the blue-grey of his shirt as if they are on a quest to penetrate the tough fabric made to withstand and isolate from precisely such intimacies. Uneven furrows in the coarse material have formed under the pressure and it is these points of impact that my eyes keep coming back to, it is them that I see even with my eyes closed.

... Did the officer acknowledge and respond to the young woman's pain?... Has her urgent touch succeeded in reaching the tiny white fibres that deliver sensations to the brain? Is it finding recognition?... Interlocuters shared that they had witnessed his tears in 2013, but the photo leaves this unclear and open to the imagination. The tears are still to come, the shoulders have not yet lost their disciplined lines. However, it is the sight of the wrinkles in his neat uniform that fills me with anticipation and a sense of possibilities. And it is as if the flat pixels that assemble this image have made furrows, too, bending outwards and tearing through the fabrics of space-time to slightly unsettle the worlds of others and infect them with possibilities.



Crying Girl and a Policeman; Photographer: Stefan Stefanov, 2013.

The picture that I am looking at was taken by the photographer Stefan Stefanov on the late afternoon of 12 November 2013, in the center of Sofia, Bulgaria. It stills a moment in a turbulent period of mass discontent that continued (with few brief interruptions) for two eventful years.<sup>1</sup> In June 2013, a controversial nomination of a notorious media mogul, Delyan Peevski, as the head of the all-powerful national security agency (DANS) enraged tens of thousands of Bulgarians. Following the nomination, protesters packed the central streets of the capital (and other cities and towns) for more than one hundred and fifty consecutive days to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski and his government and the return of “morality in politics.”<sup>2</sup> In late October, students, who had named themselves *Ranobudnite Studenti* (Early Rising Students), occupied all major universities across the country to demand the government’s resignation while attempting to live the kind of future they wished to see in the occupied spaces. On 12 November 2013, as deputies were voting on a controversial 2014 budget, *Ranobudnite Studenti* surrounded the National Assembly and tried to prevent representatives from leaving. As the police sought to cordon off the passage of deputies by blocking off a long stretch of streets between the Parliament and the Ministerial Assembly building, students and protesters clashed with the police.

In 2016, a former member of *Ranobudnite Studenti*’s organizing body (SHTAB)<sup>3</sup>, described the intensity of that day of protests to me, his hurried speech and short sentences mimicking something of the scene that he wished to communicate:

That day, the whole day, was terrible! All day it was a fight with the police but a lot. We carried benches and made barricades. The police came, beat us, and smashed our barricades. One hundred meters down we start making new barricades... After twelve hours of protests, people got exhausted and went home.

Struggle and exhaustion, people dragging and piling benches, stones, and maintenance hole covers ... and amid all this, an intense confrontation between a young protester and the police. The man had climbed on top of a deputy’s car just as the representative (Anton Kutev from the Bulgarian Socialist Party) was trying to leave the area in it. Reporters’ cameras followed the altercation, which became physical when others intervened to prevent the police from taking the man into custody (BNT 2014).

Stefan Stefanov was at the protests as a hired freelance photographer<sup>4</sup>, tasked to document the events of the day. Like *Ranobudnite Studenti* who initiated the strike that day, he too was a student at the time, enrolled at the National Academy for Theatrical and Film Arts (NATFIZ). But while other photographers were preoccupied with the confrontation that took place around the deputy's car, Stefanov's gaze was stilled by a quieter and less spectacular scene—a young woman tensely clutching the shoulders of a uniformed officer just meters away from the altercation (BNT 2014). The two would later become known to most simply as Dessi and Ivan.

That night, upon returning from the protests, Stefanov uploaded the photograph to his Facebook account and was encouraged by a friend to change its permissions to public. By the next morning, Stefanov was surprised to find the image shared more than 5,000 times. Then, the image began appearing in various places like Bosnia, Brazil, Spain, Uruguay, Venezuela, and the Netherlands, where people claimed it as their own, re-imagined it for their own strives, and imbued it with different shared memories and dreams.

It was through social media that I, too, first came across this image. In 2013 and 2014, it made multiple appearances in my Facebook news feed, at times taking over the daily influx of pictures of newborns, pets, and beautiful landscapes. But it was only after I began my dissertation fieldwork in Bulgaria in 2016 that I started to really take notice of the very real effects of this photograph on others and of the ways it impressed upon them a sense of possibility and hope. I arrived in Sofia with the intention to trace the afterlives of the 2013–2014 mass protests by studying new social clubs, new networks, alternative media, and publications, as well as new forms of socialities born out of encounters at the protests. Some of these projects, relationships, and networks endure and continue to sustain different forms of resistance to this day. However, I was particularly struck by the way many of my interlocutors used the poetic form and poetic imagination to preserve and extend relationships with others and to sustain their desire for things to be otherwise. My research then shifted, to pay particular attention and give space to the poetic and to images, rhythm and sounds, affects, and enchanting spaces and materialities.

The 2013–2014 protests in Bulgaria had a highly aesthetic dimension. Protesters re-enacted the fall of the Berlin Wall, brought to life the famous painting *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix (1830), carried coffins and parked cardboard tanks in front of government buildings, turned the space in front of the Parliament into a beach or a coffee stand, painted messages

with human bodies. Many of these images had helped shape the identity of the protest and to popularize it. Velinova, Tomov, and Raycheva (2017) and Trifonov (2016) have studied the symbolic meanings of images from the 2013–2014 protest. This paper, however, takes a different approach and takes on different interests.

Prompted by my own and my interlocutors' response to the 2013 image of Dessi and Ivan and inspired by Roland Barthes' (1982) explorative search of photography's potential to "pierce" and hold us, create desire, and make us "be there," in this article I undertake to trace some of the image's affective impacts and the multiple imaginations and possibilities that emerge from its appearances on new terrains. I have chosen to approach this task by focusing on six registers, some subjective, others collective, but all reflective of the photograph's special qualities and affective force. I start by tracing the image's effects on my own (the ethnographer's) body and then turn to track its impacts on Stefan Stefanov (the photographer) and Dessi (the young woman in the photograph). I then move on to show how it was summoned by a Bulgarian blogger who felt inspired by it. Finally, I trace the responses and imaginations it produces in global audiences by analyzing the photograph's various lives in image-sharing sites and meditate on its brief appearance in a montage of images that aims to convey a sense of courage, hope, and possibilities to a people that has forgotten its history in the Hollywood production *The Giver*. Through tracing these various sites of impact and lives of the image, I do not seek to make a single or central argument but rather to point to some of the ways in which the photograph animates bodies and worlds, lights up different fields with an air of possibility, incites desire and anticipation, blurs positions, and provokes imaginations of an alternative political and of a world-in-common. Instead of "arguing" a point here, I seek to register and show what Kathleen Stewart (2015, 227) has described as "increases and decreases, brightenings and darkenings" in a cartography distributed across a field of intensities and durations." It is, therefore, the "piling up of examples" that I have sought here, which as Rita Felsky (2020, 2) notes, "can mess up tidy schemas: causing generalizations to crumble, thwarting our best efforts to pin down and pigeonhole". In this undertaking, the ethnographer is a present, active, and creative force, not only because I pay attention to my own responses to the image but also because I choose to focus on six registers out of multiple others possible in a "study" that would always be incomplete and full of other variants.

A great part of the difficulty that I faced in writing this paper was losing sleep over how one writes in a way that "shows" and keeps alive the affective

excess of this image, how best to evoke in words a sense of something, or to hint toward an air of anticipation and possibility. My writing here strives toward an attunement to the vibrant and, I would even say, “magical” works and potential of the image. Kathleen Stewart (2005, 1028) insists that writing is “a form of life” and with her own ethnographic writing she, too, aims at an attunement, rather than at representing or interpreting. In addition, like Lisa Stevenson (2014), I embrace here a mode of uncertainty and incompleteness as my writing constantly pulsates between the poetic, dreamy, and analytical and moves across genres, geographies, the subjective and the collective. If there is a method that helps me keep up with and keep tracking this strange and fragmented mix, it is that of “repeated looking,” of “returning to an image over and over again, at different moments, under varying conditions, with shifting feelings and expectations” (Felsky 2020, 60).

### **Register One: The Ethnographer**

Anthropologists like Michael Taussig, Anna Tsing, and Kathleen Stewart, among others, have pointed to the significance of studying the singular and the subjective and have paid close attention to their own bodies’ responses to the worlds they write about as a way of attuning to their interlocutors’ experiences. As Kathleen Stewart (2005, 1027) suggests, the ethnographer and her body are “a point of impact” in a writing that does not strive toward producing accurate descriptions of realities but seeks to trace the work of affective forces and their possible conjunctures. Michael Taussig (1987) recognized a “magical realism” at work in the Colombian Amazon by participating in a shamanistic ritual, which excited and pained his body, saturated his senses, and evoked hallucinatory visions in him. It is through this experience that Taussig (1987, 11) is able to “feel what is at stake, the madness of the passion” in the Amazon. Anna Tsing (2005), too, registered her own body’s disorientation and the “assault of the senses” produced by the smoke on the frontier of the Indonesian rainforests. This enabled her to become aware of the role of “sense disorientation” as a historical agent (Tsing 2005, 50) and provoked her to mimic its effects as a method in her award-winning ethnography *Friction* (2005).

It was through the very real sense of touch that I registered on my own body when I looked at the image of Dessi and Ivan for the first time that I came to notice its effects on others, too. Roland Barthes (1982) suggests that images can physically “pierce” bodies and that they can hold us in the most intimate of ways. With his last book before his untimely death, *Camera Lucida: Reflections*

on *Photography* (1982), he leaves us with a haunting study of photography. In it, he points to a photograph's ability to "certify a presence," to extend the life and affective power of something that "has been" by presenting it as something that "still is" without resolving the contradiction<sup>5</sup> (Barthes 1982, 86). The book is a painful search for an image that Barthes could hold on to, in order to keep something of the reality and presence of his deceased mother alive. And in it, Barthes becomes the subject of his own research, trusting his own senses, registering images' impacts on his own body.

As Pierre Taminiaux (2009, 103) writes, contrary to the focus on technique in the study of photography by others like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, "Barthes was searching for a sort of subjective aesthetics, an original discourse on forms that would be able to integrate the vast realm of his own emotions and inner feelings." It is through his subjective searching that Barthes comes to differentiate two ways an image could affect. He uses the term *studium* to refer to the responses that images could arise in us, which are provoked by culturally and historically developed sensibilities, our learned responses, and logical reactions. *Punctum*, on the other hand, is "singular" and "aberrant," a "blind field" that Barthes (1980, 47, 57–59) suggests, "does not consist in 'seeing,' but in being there," a detail of an image that draws one closer to it, erasing distance and entangling us unexpectedly.

If I am to use Barthes' language, then the wrinkles effected by the hold of the girl and captured in this photograph are my *punctum*. The evidence of the lines' advancement at modifying the shape of the grey shirt animate me and fill me with a sense of possibility. Indeed, my eyes continue to track the creases' dispersing paths even now, as I write this, as if they are traces of or to something else. Through seeing them, I can imagine and feel the effects of the young woman's touch as pressure that is palpable on my own skin. It is they that make the touch immediate and present to me, taking me there, not as a spectator or observer, but as the shoulder and skin of another. I share skin with that of the officer but, at the same time, desire and anticipate a response together with the young woman, a response that remains uncertain but possible. In a kind of non-logical leap that is more akin to the works of a poetic imagination, the sight of the lines that modify the textile impresses on me the sense of blurred boundaries and subject positions and visions of recontoured worlds and gentler politics, all of these born by a single aberrant touch.

Let me elaborate further by painting another picture. What is out of focus in this image are politics of "the real" (power and resistance); "the facts" of



an apparent confrontation between the police and the protesters live in its background. This image does disclose something of the threat that the protesters posed to those in power, as evident by the riot gear worn by the three police officers, also captured in the photograph, or the tight shoulder-to-shoulder line the officers form in this key location that houses important government buildings and is known as “the triangle of power” in Sofia. Yet, much of what the protests, the protest events, or the main actors looked like, or any clues as to their success remain peripheral or invisible in this image.

On the other hand, many photographs and videos have captured the violence that took place minutes before and steps away from where Dessi encountered Ivan. One video documents the contact between a female police officer and a demonstrator but in it, the police officer can be heard addressing the protester as “a piece of trash” (Bojkov 2013). The man has dared to pick up the officer’s torn epaulette shoulder badge from the ground to return it to her. Here, the touch and gesture are unwelcome. In this case, the protester’s contact with an element of the officer’s uniform is immediately penalized. Boundaries and subject positions are reinstated shortly after this exchange as the officer and the protester swiftly move away from each other to return to their camps.

It is this type of antagonistic politics and the hostility between two camps that Stefanov’s image disrupts for me, as it puts on focus a possibility for things to be “otherwise” (Povinelli 2011). It makes visible the possibility that a young woman, “a part that has no part”<sup>6</sup> (Ranci re 2004), and her barely noticeable gesture on the grand scale of the events of 2013, can illuminate an alternative political future and create desire and anticipation for a something more that is not pictured. For me, the image disrupts a general narrative of violence, a dominant view of politics as antagonism and in-the-face resistance, and the current distribution of bodies. At the same time, it discloses an “otherwise” in which Dessi, Ivan, and I are “being-between: between identities, between worlds,” a potential for a political “being-together” (Ranci re 2004, 137).

Such visions are provoked by the image but “beyond” what the eye could see in it. Nevertheless, they are only possible because Stefanov noticed and captured that moment. Without the photograph’s graphicness, materiality, and evidence of something that has been, the gesture and detail would have remained unmarked and unnoticed.

## Register Two: The Photographer

In an interview for a Bulgarian national TV channel, Stefanov (BTV News) recalled the moment he captured the image: “I had not thought or practiced it or anything of that sort. I just saw a pure emotion happening and lifted the camera.” Stefanov experienced the emotion as an event, which produced an immediate response in his own body. One gesture triggered another and the hand holding the camera replicated something of the happening across time and space. In an interview for Bulgarian National Television, Stefanov shared that among the hundreds of photographs he took during the 2013–2014 protests in Bulgaria, this was his most treasured image. Prompted by one of the hosts of the morning show “The Day Begins,” Stefanov called it “my photograph,” emphasizing that the photograph resonated with him at a personal level (BNT 2014).

When I had the opportunity to interview Stefanov a few years later<sup>7</sup>, he stressed that, for him, the image was one of the most “truthful” images from the protests. He explained that while most people go to protests “with the clear purpose of taking selfies of themselves protesting, to be taken pictures of, to show that they were there, and to count themselves,” the two people in the focal point of this image did not know they were being photographed. The spontaneous and sincere emotion that Stefanov witnessed was at odds with the violence around him and it reminded him of a simple “truth” that he also referred to as the “foundation” and “force” of the image: “in this photograph could be seen that despite the critical moment, police officers and protesters are people. [ ... ] Despite the struggle of one or the other, it is important at the end that we all remain people.” It appears that for Stefanov, the “truthfulness” and power of this image has much to do with its ability to disrupt the “counting,” to re-configure the expected positioning of bodies, and to make visible and possible other relational arrangements.

The TV host who asked Stefanov about his famous shot noted his keen attention to the untypical, the misfit, and the less spectacular (BNT 2014). She was referring to Stefanov’s photographic exhibition *The Secret Life of the Library* (2014), which she contrasted to images taken at the “dynamic events” of a protest. Stefanov’s forthcoming exhibition at the time of that interview was seeking to capture, as he qualified it, an “inner world” of which he wanted to create “something similar to a history” through a method called reportage photography (BNT 2014). In such “histories,” emotions, relations,

and atmospheres become the focus, as they are the “events” that come to matter. One enchanting image from his library exhibition, for example, shows an alien life (a small green plant) growing out of a blurred bookshelf. A new and fragile life grows in a place that preserves memories of people and worlds that are believed to be no longer. Another photograph documents the physical contact between a large shopping cart and dusty piles of thick books. In it, again, Stefanov has captured the contact between two worlds where a powerful symbol of consumerism appears in a place that resists its values and safeguards memories of past struggles inspired by other possibilities.

These photographs make visible a quiet and, perhaps, ephemeral reconfiguring of places and re-positioning of things. They show that such worlds could come into contact and form new relational configurations, and they “certify” that these have been, if we only have the keen eye to notice the small, the unusual, and the poetic. Emphasizing the documentary value of these relational “otherwises,” of these altered atmospheres and worlds, Stefanov opted to use black and white film, and not a digital camera. This allowed him to preserve the actual reflection of the photographed thing on the negative, of the way it authentically affected and transformed light without the added simulation of red, blue, and green that makes color photography.

Stefanov told me that with the photographs for the library exhibition and with those taken at the protests, he wished to capture “relations” and “their influences” on people, things, and worlds. Indeed, it seems to me that it is a similar kind of attentiveness to the less spectacular and the misfit and a sensitivity to “inner worlds” and emotions that enchanted Stefanov on that day on the twelfth of November. Just like in the photographs in his subsequent exhibition that focused on the library space, in the image of Dessi and Ivan, points of contact, emotions, and atmospheres are “events” that matter, as they make visible quiet and subtle disruptions of the existing regimes, bodies, and things. And, as the next section will show, it was Dessi’s attentiveness to a small detail that disclosed the officer’s vulnerability and her emotional response to it that created possibilities for the imagining of a more hopeful political.

### **Register Three: The Girl in the Photograph**

I met Dessislava Nikolova (Dessi)<sup>8</sup> while I was conducting interviews with other participants in the 2013 mass protests in Sofia. A young woman at the time of our conversation, Dessi was engaged in multiple initiatives, from protecting

Bulgaria's national parks from large commercial developments to exposing corruption and dependencies in the judicial system. As we were sitting at a café across from the Parliament, she pointed to the camera carefully positioned on the table in front of her and noted that it had been her own passion for photography that had attracted her to the protests initially. She then continued:

“I have told this story so many times before.” Her eyes fixed on her drink as if she could see the events she was about to narrate unfolding in the creamy liquid. “It comes out of me mechanically already and I dream about it, too. It took place the day when there was this massive cordon of police all the way between the Parliament and Serdika Metro Station. Just before the photo was taken, I had witnessed how that boy that jumped on top of the trunk of a car—you know who, right?—how the police beat the hell out of him and then took him away. This really upset me and just as I was walking among the protesters, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a young police officer who had a nosebleed. I did not think much and just put my hands on his shoulders, looked him in the eyes, and started crying. He told me ‘Be strong! Everything will be alright!’ and tears rolled down his cheeks too.”

The nosebleed had made it possible for Dessi to “see” the young police officer among, what another protester described to me as “a sea of helmets.” This “detail” had reminded her of the officer's vulnerability and had elicited her reaction, a reaction that sought his recognition of her own vulnerability and pain at that moment. Looking at the photograph, however, we do not see the nosebleed and do not know for certain that the police officer will respond to Dessi's touch. We cannot hear his words that promise that “Everything will be alright,” but the photo discloses the possibility of a different shared future, one that continues to live in Dessi's gesture.

Dessi thinks that what made the photograph an overnight sensation is that it reminds us that “we are all people” and that “[w]hen police officers return home they return to their families.” She believes that the image brought hope to others because it is material evidence that we all have something-in-common—we love and are vulnerable. And it is this that another protest participant, Polina Radoslavova, recognizes in a different detail of the image that has to be imagined.

## Register Four: A Protester and a Blogger

In her blog, Polina Radoslavova (2013) recalls that her network of friends repeatedly shared the photograph of Dessi and Ivan and that it often appeared right next to a video that had captured the nearby violent scene involving the demonstrator (Kenarov 2013). She writes that she “observed the terror, shock and repulsion of my friends as they shared the video, as well as the spark of hope, the belief, that ‘everything will be alright’ as they shared the photograph” (Radoslavova 2013).

“Eyes. Only the Eyes” is the title of her blog entry, even if she could not see the eyes of the two people pictured because of the camera angle. The day after the photograph was taken, Radoslavova walked past the long cordon of police that was, once again, positioned at the “triangle of power” to deter the protesters and wrote:

When you look into somebody’s eyes, you learn much about him and about yourself.

And I think that if we stand and look at their [the police officers’] eyes for a few minutes, no more, maybe they will see something that they have lost, maybe they will see something that they never had. Maybe they will see their children and spouses, their parents ... maybe they will see People who simply do not want to accept their role as puppets in a system, as casualties of their times, *perdeta*<sup>9</sup>, disinterested and crossing the street to the other sidewalk.

And maybe in that moment we and they, too, begin to believe that ‘everything will be alright.’

Radoslavova could not see the eyes in the photograph but was able to imagine them locked in that moment of charged stillness. A graphic detail that is not there but has to be imagined—the eyes that “pierce”—makes Radoslavova believe that looking straight into the eyes of the officers can have transformative effects. It can make the officers “see” and care. Convinced that eyes can “touch,” this blogger proposes that protesters can change the reality of Bulgarian politics by replicating something of that “touch” in their daily encounters with the police officers. Radoslavova asks others to imagine with her, to imagine-together that such transformations are possible, that eyes could truly “pierce” and make others care about the human standing on the other side of the barricades. Eyes that are vulnerable, eyes that we share.

## Register Five: Global Image-Sharing Communities

Much of the global spread of this image was driven by personal blogs like Radoslavova's, as well as by social media, and popular image-sharing sites such as Bored Panda and Blaze Press.<sup>10</sup> In the image-sharing site Blaze Press (2014), the photograph appeared in the company of others that span across various times and places: a man playing a piano while facing riot police in Kiev, Ukraine in 2013, a woman handing a flower to a police officer during the Vietnam War protests in Arlington, Virginia in 1967, a photograph of an elderly woman standing in front of a bulldozer to protect an injured protester in Egypt in 2013, a Brazilian protester carrying an injured officer to safety in São Paulo, Brazil in 2012, and others. While each image included in the collage is accompanied by a short note that informs the viewer of its date of capture and location, the overall sense that the collage leaves you with is loosened from the specifics of contexts and history. Instead, what appears to be powerfully illuminated is a kind of seriality and an excess of affect. These photographs could have been taken anywhere and could appear anywhere but what they do share is a lasting hold on others.

And while in Bored Panda and Blaze Press the photograph's appearance might have expressed the hopes and aspirations of an editorial team that collaged together such compelling image-stories, on Imgur, an image sharing community, upon encountering the photograph of Dessi and Ivan, people from different parts of the world felt compelled to share memories, tell stories about other images, and to post images that had affected them in a similar way. Plamentanev had started the forum on Imgur by posting the image from Bulgaria under the heading "This is what is happening in Bulgaria," with the hope that the photograph could raise awareness about the protests in his country. However, just like in Bored Panda and Blaze Press, the comments and images posted in reaction to the photograph here span the world. They capture various local struggles, and it is not the facts of these differences that appear to be important to the contributors, but an air of something other and of something possible that brings them together. One contributor writing under the alias SimplyMike posted a photograph of a woman hugging a police officer during riots in Lisbon, Portugal. Her hand lies open at the officer's chest and a cloud of fiery red hair, very similar to Dessi's, frames her youthful face. Her smile, however, radiates with joy and confidence and her gesture seems soft and untroubling in my eyes.

Writing under the alias Redemst, another person shared that the image from Bulgaria had brought back memories of scenes from the 2013 Taksim square protests in Turkey. There protesters took to the streets to save Taksim Gezi Park and Istanbul's trees from being cut down to make room for developments. (Could Redemst have imagined that a few years later the young woman in the photograph would be fighting to save national parks in Bulgaria?) Meowl, another contributor to the forum, recalled images of student protests in Rome, while Decadentsavant remembered seeing an "exact" photo taken in 2006 of an Israeli soldier and a woman protester. He wrote: "I've been looking for it for years with no luck. Can anyone help?"

Decadentsavant asks other contributors to help him rescue an image from oblivion, an image that had once held this person. And it is as if Decadentsavant had sensed a kind of solidarity with people in this forum, people he had never met before but who had also experienced something of the touch, desire, hope, and anticipation that certain images could elicit. And it might be because of this fragile sense of a community of image keepers that a contributor to the forum, MustangLover2, would feel compelled to point to "the pain of oppression" as a problem-in-common shared by "the oppressed people of the world" and another, FLOWERPOWER1234I (2013), would reflect on a possible shared future by evoking an imagined "us:" "THIS! This is what we need! To be united! policemen are people too. Just like us! No more divide and conquer! Guys lets [sic] not fall for that." Others expressed their solidarity with words of encouragement: "Stay strong" (bclinansmith 2013) and "Stay safe" or "be safe" (IloveUimgur 2013; pstylovesu 2013; sldizzle 2013; FromTheFairy Fort 2013).

And as it circulated on the internet, the image continued to affect others, complicate boundaries and pull worlds together but I also began noticing instances of the image's appropriations to new lives and new contexts. In fact, when I presented a shorter version of this paper at an American Anthropological Association conference in 2017, another panel presenter remarked that she had always believed that the photograph pictured a scene from the protests in Bosnia, as she had seen the image circulating in networks she worked with there.

In February 2014, the image was shared thousands of times as a photograph taken during the anti-government protests in Venezuela (Russo 2014). It was accompanied by a line of text that appeared to reproduce the words exchanged between the girl and the police officer as: "Tu y yo somos venezolanos mi pana [You and I are Venezuelans my friend]." The image was also used to frame

protests in Bucharest and appeared under the heading “Meanwhile in Bosnia” on 9gag, a Hong Kong-based media sharing website (2018). It made a more recent appearance in protests against anti-coronavirus lockdown measures in the Netherlands in 2021 (AFP 2021). Stefanov, too, discussed the multiple (mis) placements of the image: “Some said that the scene had taken place in Brazil, Mexico or during the protests in Spain” (Besnard 2014).

By living multiple lives knit with different memories and dreams and appearing simultaneously here and there and in constellations with other images that span the world, this photograph evokes a sense of both disorientation and re-orientation. Through its multiple and various appearances it re-orientates the senses toward a different “cartography of the perceptible” (Rancière 2009, 72), one that is loosened of context, national boundaries, and space-time particulars and that enables imaginations of alternative solidarities, as well as a glimpse at a world that both exists and is still to come. And it is through the affective touch of this image and others that the memories and outlines of another, still possible world, become visible to the main hero from *The Giver*.

### **Register Six: A Hollywood production**

In the most talked about appearance of this photograph in the Hollywood production *The Giver* (2014) based on Lois Lowry’s (1993) award-winning novel, this image and others flash forward as imagistic fragments from the past and enable the main character to see the truth and to act to save his people.

At the beginning of the film, we are introduced to a utopian community of equals governed by reason, clarity, and precision. This is a place that has no name or specific location—it could be any community, anywhere. The Elder of the community, played by Meryl Streep, had wished to shield her people from the violence, fear, and pain that had been a part of human history and of this community’s past. In this new world that appears free of suffering and conflicts every community member has an assigned a role and there is no space for passion, emotion, art, or human creativity.

As the main character, young Jonas, is chosen to become the next Receiver, we meet the Giver. An eccentric elderly man played by Jeff Bridges, the Giver is both a member of the community and its exception. He listens to music, plays the piano, and has a library full of books. But he also has “the capacity to see the beyond.” His house sits at the edge of an abyss and faces a mysterious



world covered in thick fog. As the film unfolds, we learn that the other side of the abyss is not really a place but this community's memories.

The Giver imparts to Jonas the knowledge about "the beyond" through imagistic fragments from the past. The images are released via the Giver's touch. To be touched by the Giver is to experience, through a kind of hallucinatory dreaming, a rich palette of forbidden human emotions and memories. As Jonas' senses begin to awaken through the images and touch, he comes to see the systematic murders of the elderly and newborns in his "utopian" community. He decides to undertake a dangerous journey through the mysterious "beyond," in order to release his people's memories and to make them feel and see again.

The image of Dessi and Ivan flashes forward as part of a montage of images collected from around the world. These images are the Giver's gift to Jonas and are meant to give him strength and courage before his perilous journey. Just like the montages of images that appear in *Blaze Press*, *Bored Panda*, and *Imgur*, these, too, remind of past struggles but, as they appear together, are loosened of specific context. We do not know when or where they were captured. They are image-memories that tell of human sorrow, love, pain, beauty, human creativity, and art and help Jonas see a past's future that is far from perfect but more hopeful and humane.

In *The Giver*, Jonas is able to save his community by attuning his senses to the power of images, images that are fragments from the past but that disclose and create desire for an alternative future. He becomes the hero in the story by being an activist of a different kind—one that senses, dreams, and hopes. By deploying the power of images and his imagination, Jonas is able to disrupt the existing distribution of the sensible and transform his community.

## Conclusion

This, too, has been a paper about the power of images to touch people, disrupt worlds (like my own), and impart knowledge of a different kind. Rather than focusing on the photograph's meaning or on technique, I have sought to attune to the force of an image by tracking its impacts in six very different registers. Keeping things plural, indeterminate, and in motion, trusting my senses, and taking the imagination (mine and that of others) seriously have helped me show how a photograph can become multiple others of itself, can redistribute bodies,

evoke image-memories, change atmospheres, disclose possibilities for other kinds of solidarities, and create desires and imaginations for alternatives. It is through this incongruent and moving mix of things that the outlines of another world become visible.

The ethnographer is always already implicated in the struggle between worlds. And I have chosen mine. I have elected to chase an image that resists neat descriptions and representations but animates and evokes visions of gentler, more hopeful politics. I have written with a lens on what could be. For Povinelli (2011), “the possible” already exists but in arrangements, in configurations of disparate things and it is this that I have found and have tried to replicate here. Povinelli (2012, 472, 453) also writes that, in order to be able to attune to “the future already among us” we need to experiment with tools, vocabularies and methodologies. This paper has experimented with methods and with writing. It has, itself, been an attempt at mapping the outlines of a hopeful world, one that is both very much real and imagined.

In a way of sustaining the image’s affective power and to end this paper by keeping it open, I offer you another image. It is an image of one possible relational future where the promise that “[e]verything will be alright” seems close and tangible. By leaving you with this image, I also wish to replicate some of its hope on a new terrain (Miyazaki 2004), that of a scholarly journal.

## **Epilogue**

Dessi shared with me that she met Ivan two years after the famous photograph was taken. He had left the police force and had since become an artist abroad. In 2017, Dessi and Ivan replicated their original photograph together (Karaivanov 2017; Markov 2017). This time, Ivan’s shoulders were covered with the soft, sheer, and colorful fabric of a rainbow flag. Still gazing in each other’s eyes, Dessi and Ivan were all smiles, as they had stumbled upon each other at the Sofia Gay Pride Parade.



Four years later. The same characters—different circumstances. Incommensurable joy;  
Photographer: Yavor Karaivanov, 2017.

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## Notes de fin

- 1 While the demands, messages and participants varied, sometimes significantly, and many Bulgarian analysts differentiate two or three protest waves, I view what became known as the “winter” (starting February 2013) and “summer” (starting June 2013) protests as deeply interconnected. Additionally, both build on networks and lessons learned in earlier protests, such as the February 2012 discontent against the ratification of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, or the June 2012 mass protests, which succeeded in preventing a law that would have allowed for private developments in protected national forests. During the “winter” 2013 protests, hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians took to the streets in an outrage over a sudden and insufferable increase in electricity prices. Twenty-one to 22 percent of the population lived below the poverty line (National Statistical Institute 2018). Protesters demanded an end to energy monopolies and government corruption and some called for the “revision of transition.” The demonstrations led to the resignation of the centre-right government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and to early elections that resulted in a coalition cabinet headed by Plamen Oresharski. Like the February-March protests the same year, the early days of the “summer” wave of discontent were marked by a similar sense of an outrage over a corrupt political system that had worked for the few while the rest of the Bulgarians had struggled to make ends meet.
- 2 A large informal network, *Protestna Mreja* (Protest Network) was formed with the original purpose of coordinating actions and events among the various groups that participated in the protests. While some of my interlocutors saw that it was only natural and necessary that *Protestna Mreja* and the people who established it became the face of the protests, others whom I interviewed between 2016 and 2017 saw it as an attempt to steer the protests in a particular ideological direction.
- 3 *Ranobudnite Studenti’s (RS) SHTAB* was originally intended as a coordinating group on a rotational principle however, according to participants I interviewed, the lack of volunteers and the ambitions of some students led to this group becoming RS’s informal leadership body.
- 4 Stefanov was a contract photographer for the Bulgarian newspaper *Trud*.
- 5 He refers to this as “the madness of photography.”

- 6 The photograph also provoked a discussion on how young is too young to have a political voice and to be able to protest. Dessi was fifteen years old at the time and unable to vote in Bulgarian elections. Because of her age, Dessi and her parents were called in the police and questioned.
- 7 Stefanov, Stefan. Interview by author. Email exchange, 21 January 2021.
- 8 Nikolova, Dessislava. Interview by author. Sofia, 15 September 2016.
- 9 Literally translated it means drapes but is used to describe a person who does not see or care to see or know, someone who is blind to what happens around them.
- 10 For example, Bored Panda included the image from the Bulgarian protests in its list of “18 Powerful Moments of Peace during Protests,” while BlazePress incorporated it in a collection of images under the heading: “35 Beautiful Moments When We Loved Each Other In the Face of Violence” (Blaze Press 2014).

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