

Final Paper: Reposting is Not Enough

Introduction

In May 2024, the AI-generated image “All Eyes on Rafah” circulated widely across Instagram, primarily through stories, accumulating over 47 million shares within days. The image depicts rows of white tents arranged to spell out the phrase “All Eyes on Rafah,” referencing the mass displacement and bombardment of Palestinians in Rafah during the ongoing Israeli military assault on Gaza. Although the image was generated using Microsoft’s Image Creator, and not captured directly on the ground, it functioned as a global symbol of solidarity. Its reach even surpassed the 2020 #BlackoutTuesday black squares, revealing how quickly symbolic gestures travel through affective digital publics. However, the speed and scale of its circulation also raised questions about what, if anything, was being politically accomplished through this form of mediated visibility.



This paper argues that “All Eyes on Rafah” exemplifies the emergence of aestheticized suffering, a mode of visual activism shaped by platform logics, algorithmic moderation, and affective discourse. In this mode, political violence is filtered into emotionally legible images optimized for smooth circulation. The image’s virality demonstrates how visibility itself becomes a form of participation, where the act of sharing functions less as political intervention and more as a speech act of moral self-presentation within networked publics. Drawing on theories of non-performativity (Ahmed, 2006), cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), performativity (Butler, 1993), and the networked self (Papacharissi, 2012), I examine how digital activism on Instagram turns empathy into a measurable aesthetic performance.

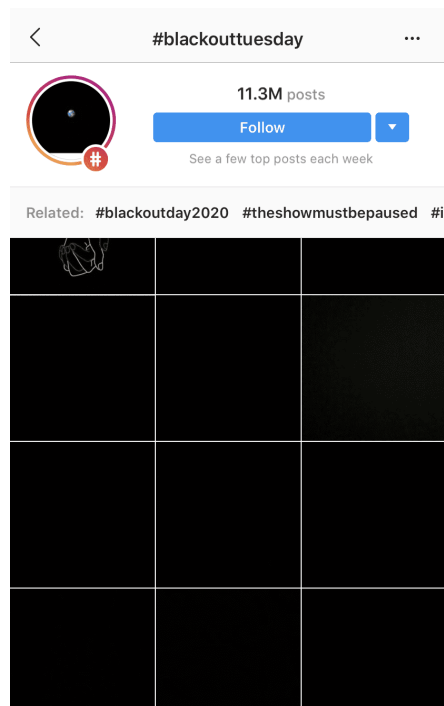
Visuality, Empathy, and the Politics of Witnessing

Across media studies, there is scholarship that emphasizes how digital platforms reshape practices of witnessing and the circulation of suffering. Berlant’s (2011) framework of cruel optimism helps explain why users remain attached to symbolic acts that offer emotional relief rather than material impact. These small gestures, liking, sharing, reposting, create a feeling of participation even when they do not step into political structures. Ahmed’s (2006) concept of non-performativity provides a parallel lens where declarations of commitment (“raising awareness,” “standing with,” etc.) often fail to enact the change they name, instead reinforcing the speaker’s moral standing. This dynamic is amplified on platforms like Instagram, where visibility functions like a social currency. The “All Eyes on Rafah” discourse extends this tension between affect and action. Across additional posts on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), users debated whether sharing the image constituted solidarity or performative detachment, with the fact that the image is also AI-generated intensifying concerns about authenticity.

Performative Allyship and Digital Visibility

Wellman’s (2022) study of performative allyship during #BlackoutTuesday demonstrates how social media activism often serves as credibility maintenance, especially for influencers. Posts that seem to express political support often operate as brand-safe moral performances to avoid audience

fragmentation and algorithmic penalties. Wellman argues that the participation of influencers in the 2020 BLM campaign functioned less as political engagement than as what Wellman calls “credibility work,” a way to maintain online reputation through visual gestures of solidarity. Her framework of “performative allyship” highlights how social media blurs the line between moral performance and self-branding. Posts that appear to be activist in intention often end up serving to maintain an image of ethical awareness within platform structures of visibility. With “All Eyes on Rafah,” this pattern shows up again: the image’s simple, symbolic design makes it easy for users to show care with little effort. Sharing it becomes a low-risk moral gesture that fits neatly into Instagram’s visual style and story format. As Wellman (2022) highlights, such gestures “signal affiliation without demanding sustained engagement” (p. 14). The platform’s affordances make allyship not only performative but also algorithmically optimized.



In an analysis by Zizi Papacharissi (2012), she conceptualizes such online expressions as part of the networked self, where affective communication becomes a primary way of civic participation. Users

navigate collapsed audiences and platform incentives by choosing forms of expression that are emotionally resonant, visually coherent, and socially low-risk.

AI and Authenticity Claims

Recent work on AI-generated imagery (Hausken, 2024) argues that artificial realism destabilizes long-held assumptions about visual truth. AI images introduce a “new order of the real,” where emotional believability outweighs contextual connection to actual events. In the case of “All Eyes on Rafah,” AI became a rhetorical turning point where critics used the artificiality of the image as evidence of the fakeness of the gesture, while defenders treated the image’s digestibility as a workaround to Instagram’s moderation of graphic violence. In public discourse, AI thus operates as an ideograph of inauthenticity, signifying that it maps onto broader concerns about sincerity and political commitment.

Platform Logics and the Aesthetics of Safety

Platform studies scholars highlight how algorithmic moderation, interface design, and engagement metrics structure online communication. Instagram’s content policies suppress graphic violence, producing what some scholars call an aesthetic filter of empathy, only certain forms of suffering are permitted to circulate (Satkhed et al., 2024; Dejmanee et al., 2020). As a result, sanitized, symbolic images often receive more visibility than documentation of actual violence.

This scholarship provides the theoretical grounding for understanding how “All Eyes on Rafah” became a site where authenticity, empathy, and platformed visibility converged.

Methodology

Through the combination of discourse and platform analysis, I examine public posts on X (Twitter) and Instagram that critique or defend the “All Eyes on Rafah” image. These texts represent distinct affective positions, some critical of the image as performative, others defending it as a necessary form of awareness. By examining patterns in how users describe, defend, and critique this form of digital activism, the analysis identifies how moral visibility is constructed through language.

The platform focus of the analysis considers how Instagram's design shapes the image's circulation and meaning. Instagram's "Add Yours" Story template made it easy for users to repost the image with minimal effort, transforming solidarity into an aestheticized, low-risk action. Analyzing how platform logics intersect with affective discourses reveals how digital environments translate empathy into a more measurable form of engagement. Together, these methods illuminate how both language and technology contribute to the aestheticization of suffering in online activism.

Critiques of Performative Solidarity

Public critiques of the "All Eyes on Rafah" image focused overwhelmingly on its artificiality and the perceived hollowness of the solidarity it represented, arguing that it displaced attention away from the real suffering in Gaza and onto the people sharing it. On X, one user, @bluepashminas, wrote:

"Palestinian journalists have been risking their lives for months to document every single massacre and instead people are reposting an AI-generated 'art' that says 'All Eyes on Rafah' and tells us nothing about what is actually happening on the ground or gives us any action items."

Another user, @ghiblijoonies, similarly argued:

"I just think ppl shouldn't post AI images of Palestine (specifically Rafah) to 'raise awareness' when there is plenty of real footage being shared by Palestinians. It comes off as wildly performative and disingenuous when the LEAST you can do as an ally is spread the TRUTH."

These critiques do not simply reject the image for being AI-generated; they position its artificiality as symbolic of the broader problem of shallow, symbolic participation. AI becomes an ideograph for fakeness, pointing towards insincerity that maps directly onto the perceived insufficiency of the gesture. The claim that an AI image "tells us nothing" highlights a demand for informational or indexical authenticity, a desire to witness real bodies, real destruction, and real suffering.

Additionally, both comments articulate a form of frustration with what Ahmed (2006) calls non-performative speech acts, utterances that on the surface appear to enact care or justice but, in practice, reaffirm the speaker's virtue rather than generate change. The repetition of the phrase "raise awareness" is itself indicative of this, as it not only presumes that others are not already aware but also presumes that the one sharing it centers their role as the person "raising awareness" and presumes that awareness is an end in itself. As Ahmed explains, such language often "works precisely because it fails to bring about what it names" (p. 117). These tweets expose a disjunction between visibility and action: the moral act of sharing becomes a substitute for engaging with the material conditions of violence.

These users reject not necessarily the intent behind "raising awareness" but the way such gestures fail to do the work they name. When critics insist on sharing "real footage" or "the truth," they reveal an affective and moral investment in authentic witnessing. Yet, their own posts participate in the same attention economy they critique, a cycle where authenticity becomes another form of visibility. This recursive loop underscores the central tension: both the act of sharing the AI image and the act of rejecting it function as moral performances within the same platformed public.

The Defense of Visibility

In contrast, other users defended the act of reposting as a legitimate, if limited, form of participation. On Instagram, the user @lanzybear posted the image with an overlay caption reading:

"If the only thing you've ever done is repost this photo, welcome to the movement. Now educate yourself. Talk to Palestinians. Join a rally. Listen to videos and teach-ins. Get acquainted with the reality on the ground. Performative activism is not helpful. Education and sustained activism and action is. Push yourself out of your comfort zone and get acquainted with that feeling. Reposting is not enough anymore."

This post simultaneously acknowledges the limitations of performative activism while framing reposting as a potential gateway to deeper involvement. It appeals to users' affective identification, "welcome to

the movement,” to create a sense of inclusion and possibility. Yet by locating moral value in educating oneself, it reframes activism as a personal project rather than collective struggle. As Berlant (2011) suggests in *Cruel Optimism*, such attachments to small, hopeful gestures often keep people invested in systems that limit transformative change. Here, the hope that reposting might lead to action becomes its own form of consolation. Comments on this post further reveal the affective debate over moral visibility. The user @maidenicole responded:

“Now is not the time to shame people for finding the courage to speak and let it out there, even if it's the simplest way they can, or, as we like to call it, ‘performative activism.’ We need every word to reach as many. All the ways for Rafah to gain attention is needed.”

Another user, @strick_epc, added:

“I think this image was a good way for influencers trying to maintain a platform without getting shadowbanned or discredited by their followers, while still expressing their empathy for the Palestinian people.”

Both comments exemplify the defense of visibility as virtue. They frame moral worth not in terms of action but in the act of being seen as caring. The notion that “all the ways for Rafah to gain attention is needed” treats visibility as a moral currency, aligning with what Papacharissi (2012) describes as the “affective public,” a networked sphere where emotion becomes the primary mode of collective civic expression. Meanwhile, the acknowledgment that influencers used the image to avoid “getting shadowbanned” underscores how moral performance adjusts to platform safety. Care becomes strategic.

Counter-Images and the Demand for Realness

Some posts sought to reclaim realism as a more ethical form of witnessing by proposing the sharing

of a counter-image that was characterized as more real than the AI image. Instagram user @profakmahmudabad created a counter-image showing Palestinians gathered around body bags labeled “All Eyes on Rafah,” captioned: “We all shared the AI image. Now let’s share the real image.”



This act of substitution attempts to restore authenticity and immediacy to the visual field. Yet, even as it rejects aestheticization, it still relies on the same mechanics of virality, the call to “share” remains central. This counter-image reveals what Berlant (2011) calls a cruelly optimistic structure: the belief that seeing the “real” might finally catalyze change, even though visibility alone rarely disrupts power. The desire for a “real image” shows that what’s at stake is not just truth but the emotional satisfaction of feeling one has done something meaningful. Thus, both the AI image and its critique are caught in the same loop of affective participation.

Aestheticized Suffering and Algorithmic Moderation

The “All Eyes on Rafah” image circulated primarily through Instagram’s “Add Yours” Story template feature, which allows users to instantly share pre-formatted content to their Stories. This feature minimizes friction; users can repost with one tap, participating in a mass visual ritual without composing

any text. The ease of reposting transforms solidarity into a performance of participation. The repetition of the image across millions of Stories exemplifies what Papacharissi (2012) calls the networked self, a digitally mediated identity constructed through affective expression and visibility. Users who reposted “All Eyes on Rafah” were not just amplifying a message; they were performing the moral awareness of their networked self to their followers. The Story format, which disappears after 24 hours, reinforces this evanescence.

Instagram’s algorithm privileges visually cohesive, emotionally clear content that aligns with its culture of aesthetic positivity. The “All Eyes on Rafah” image, with its simplicity and absence of graphic violence, fits seamlessly into Instagram’s visual limitations. Its digestibility makes it safe to share. In contrast, raw footage from Gaza, images of destruction or death, often gets flagged, downranked, or removed for violating community guidelines. The platform thus curates a politically sanitized visual field in which suffering must be cleaned up to be seen.

This creates an aesthetic filter of empathy where only certain representations of suffering are algorithmically acceptable. As user @strick_epc observed, the image provided “a good way for influencers trying to maintain a platform without getting shadowbanned.” Platform moderation thus shapes the moral imagination of activism. By rewarding sanitized depictions of violence, Instagram produces aestheticized suffering, a visual politics where demonstrating the capacity to feel outweighs the demand to act.

The image’s abstraction comforts viewers by providing emotional clarity without confronting them with real bodies, destruction, or death. This comfort benefits non-Palestinian, often Western audiences, enabling participation without risk, discomfort, or political cost. The result is a visibility structure that maintains existing power dynamics: Palestinian suffering is made legible only when aesthetically softened, while actual documentation remains marginalized.

Visibility as a Measure of Solidarity

Bringing together the discourse and platform analyses shows how visibility works as both a way of talking about care and a way of performing it online. Phrases like “raising awareness” or “spreading the word” give people a sense of doing something meaningful, even when those actions mostly involve sharing or reposting. Both the users who critique this calling it performative and the users who defend it are engaging in the same system, one that measures virtue through visibility.

The virality of “All Eyes on Rafah” shows how digital activism often runs on the feeling of being part of something, of seeing and being seen caring. Its softened visuals make witnessing easier, turning empathy into something safe and shareable. In this way, visibility becomes the main form of participation: activism turns into an act of looking and being seen, where the appearance of care often stands in for deeper engagement or sustained action.

Conclusion

The “All Eyes on Rafah” image captures a defining tension in contemporary digital activism: when people witness violence and want to show solidarity, and feel connected to a collective cause, the platforms they use often turn these desires into something visual and simplified. The speed at which the image spread shows how quickly people gravitate toward symbols that let them feel involved, even when they do not show the full reality of what is happening. Because the image was AI-generated, these tensions became even more visible. For critics, the use of AI became proof that the gesture of sharing was shallow or fake, an imitation of care that matched the artificiality of the image itself. For others, the AI aspect made the image useful: it was non-graphic enough to avoid Instagram’s content moderation, making it one of the few ways people felt they could keep Gaza on their feeds without being flagged or suppressed.

Its virality reveals something important about how digital publics now operate. People are emotionally invested in showing that they care, but they are also limited by the visual rules and

commercial priorities of the platforms they use. Instagram rewards images that are clean, digestible, and aesthetically coherent. As a result, symbolic images like “All Eyes on Rafah” circulate widely, while graphic evidence of violence often disappears or receives far less visibility. What emerges is a form of solidarity that is shaped as much by platform design as by political intention, a kind of witnessing that is felt, seen, and performed, but that still exists within the boundaries of what platforms allow.

It is a digitally mediated form of witnessing that is intensely affective yet depoliticized. Users who share the image engage in a practice of moral visibility, displaying their alignment through acts that are more symbolic than transformative. Yet these acts, while limited, also speak to a widespread longing for collective identification in moments of geopolitical violence.

A more ethical model of digital activism needs to center the voices, images, and demands of those most affected by violence, rather than circulating aestheticized stand-ins. It would require users to move beyond the performance of seeing and toward forms of engagement that challenge algorithmic invisibility and leverage digital publics to support material political action.

Ultimately, the significance of the “All Eyes on Rafah” moment lies not solely in the image itself but in the debates it sparked about authenticity, care, and complicity. These debates call out who gets seen, who gets heard, and under what conditions visibility becomes possible through digital activism. They reveal how AI-generated imagery disrupts established norms of witnessing, and how platform-mediated publics negotiate the political responsibilities of looking. The challenge for future activism lies not in rejecting visibility altogether, but in asking how to move beyond it, how to turn aestheticized empathy into collective political action that confronts, rather than softens, the realities of suffering.

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.

/s/ Elizabeth Diaz