

**Diversity and Otherness as Political-Visual Constructions.
Readings of Displaced Lives from the World Press Photo**

**Diversidad y otredad como construcciones político-visuales.
Lecturas de vidas desplazadas desde el World Press Photo**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of refuge within the Mediterranean in Southern Europe. The theoretical framework addresses the securitization of borders amidst the neoliberal crisis and reflects upon the meaning of displaced life, a with particular emphasis on the precarity and vulnerability of individuals in transit between the global North and South. A mixed methodology is employed, incorporating elements of philosophy, art, and anthropology, aiming to highlight the political construction of otherness and diversity. The material used consists of artistic representations from the World Press Photo award (2015-2020) which reveal multiculturalism as a disguised and paternalistic form of racism. This study proposes ethical-political contributions that position aesthetics as a Eurocentric construction surrounding the current theme of refuge.

Keywords: 1. refugees, 2. análisis visual, 3. neoliberalism, 4. The Mediterranean, 5. Southern Europe.

RESUMEN

En este estudio se realiza un análisis exploratorio del refugio en el contexto del Mediterráneo, en el sur de Europa. En la base teórica se atiende a la securitización fronteriza en medio de la crisis del neoliberalismo y se reflexiona acerca del significado de la vida desplazada con especial énfasis en la precariedad y en la vulnerabilidad de las personas en tránsito entre el norte y el sur globales. Se aborda este estudio con una metodología que incluye filosofía, arte y antropología para destacar la construcción política de la otredad y de la diversidad. La materia empleada son representaciones artísticas del premio de fotografía World Press Photo (2015-2020), en las que se observa el multiculturalismo como un racismo encubierto y paternalista. El estudio propone aportes ético-políticos que sitúan la estética como construcción eurocéntrica en torno a la temática actual del refugio.

Palabras clave: 1. refugiados, 2. visual analysis, 3. neoliberalismo, 4. Mediterráneo, 5. Europa del Sur.

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INTRODUCTION³

Emmanuel Lévinas (2002) brings together in the figures of the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner the main metaphors of otherness. Influenced by Nazism and his confinement in a concentration camp, he stands for a philosophy based on ethics, on difference, and concern and care for the other. According to him, the other allows individuals to be, and states that thus a responsibility towards the other exists even without knowing that other personally, because the actions of that other also affect oneself, and so one must put oneself in the place of the other without expecting anything in return. This openness to the other is grounded in the field of refuge analysis and is articulated with the idea that “the right to relief of thousands of refugees at risk of death constitutes a test of coherence for our concept of humanity” (De Lucas & Naïr, 2015, p. 9).

Conversely, as part of the 2001 Entremundos meeting held in La Rábida, Jesús Rodríguez presented the work *Inmigrantes* (Immigrants):

These three actions were carried out at different times and in different places but are connected to each other through a common theme: a reflection on the immigration that the south of the Iberian Peninsula receives from the African coasts (Aznar Almazán & López Díaz, 2019, p. 61).

This stands out as a relevant topic in the current European context if one takes into account the rise of xenophobic parties, widely represented in different national parliaments, because “while global immigration is encouraged by a growing internationalized economy, the reaction to it is the entrenchment of national borders and the resurgence of exclusion politics” (Davis & Akers Chacón, 2008, p. 118).

In the first action, the artist laid rows of flower bouquets on the beach to welcome migrants in one of the areas in the Mediterranean with the highest influx of small boats. The irony was in the uncertainty of the arrival and in placing flowers as a welcoming act, perhaps even anticipating the misfortune to which many migrants are thrown in that place—which some already call a “concentration camp”—, because “to migrate legally is a luxury. To emigrate illegally leads to a penal or bureaucratic hell, or death in the icy waters of the Mediterranean” (De Lucas & Naïr, 2015, p. 49). In that work, the bouquets were laid in the same way as corpses would; flowers were scattered just as the bodies of the dead who do not manage to reach the shores are arranged. The act of welcome is also a homage of death.

From the two conceptualizations, that of the ethics of difference in Lévinas, and that of the ambivalence of migrant life in Rodríguez’s performance, it can be observed that the definition of refugee set forth by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is insufficient, “very restrictive”, and

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“conditioned to the international system”, according to Sassen (2013, p. 33). According to this definition, a refugee is a person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (Convention related to the Status of Refugees of 1951, p. 2).

In this definition, “unable” is mentioned as if taking refuge were a voluntary personal act, and “unwilling” as if the simple intention were enough. Even if we were to add the meaning “did not know how” or other such categories, the lack of a greater projection towards the structural, the historical, and the contingent is still evident:

States that are part of the international law system [...] have the obligation to implement the first protection of asylum [...] to those seeking refuge. The guarantee of such right has been eroded by nationalist—protectionist—and xenophobic policies, putting at risk the integrity of millions of human beings (Guerra González & Sánchez Matías, 2018, p. 216).

The critique of postmodern anthropology, especially when it comes to the debate raised by the crisis of ethnographic authority, is also key to this research. In the same way that images are no longer only objects on the outside, so the practice of anthropology is increasingly embodied (Esteban Galarza, 2004), feet on the ground, and takes place as an act of support (Scheper Hughes, 1997) where the category of “informant” is replaced by that of “collaborator” or “co-author.” Added to this theoretical complication is the ontological and interpretative complexity of the lives of refugees, who, according to Sassen, find themselves amidst various complex processes: “for much of the twentieth century, refugees were considered to be forcibly displaced, pushed by circumstances completely beyond their control [...] This interpretation is now increasingly subject to revision” (Sassen, 2013, p. 29).

Thus, researchers face the complexities of describing, analyzing, and interpreting the refugee process/problem. According to data issued by the UNHCR, in 2016 there were over 60 million people under refugee status worldwide (Aguilar Idáñez & Buraschi, 2018), an amount that, if put together in a single territory would rank the 21st country with the largest population. When calling into question the motivations that lead to migration, De Lucas and Sami Naïr (2015) point out that migrants flee, for example, from Syria because of a war that since 2011 has resulted in more than 10 million homeless people; from Afghanistan, because of almost 40 years of conflict; from Iraq, under the control of Daesh, which has caused the displacement of five million people; from Eritrea and its dictatorship, drought, and famine; from the massacres in Nigeria; or from corruption and poverty in Kosovo. In these exoduses, a clear stratification between North and South can be seen: “they are bound to countries of the global South, that is, it is the poor countries that host 86% of the world’s refugees” (Aguilar Idáñez & Buraschi, 2018, p. 105). A demographic element lies at the heart of the problem, which marks the disparities, and evidences that the North is in decline and suffers from aging, while the South is increasing in population.

As a first sociodemographic problem in addressing the issue of refuge, we can observe how it involves dealing with a complex and variable reality, sometimes made invisible by the governments of the countries of origin, by international agencies, and by non-governmental organizations that find it difficult to access to knowledge of this reality. Global conditioning factors, such as migration and bio-multilateralism politics, agitate the difficulties or possibilities of travel and possible settlement, but also the ethnic-racial differentiation based on symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999), rejection (Appadurai, 2007), and the demarcation of cultural boundaries (Barth, 1976) and moral borders (Buraschi & Aguilar, 2016). Such symbolism, when weaving asymmetrical relationships, imposes “a type of violence that triggers submissions that are not even perceived as such, by relying on ‘collective expectations,’ on socially inculcated beliefs” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 173).

It is, therefore, a phenomenon of enormous complexity whose main actors are subject to high degrees of vulnerability, in which economic and political interests mediate and act with varying degrees of symmetry and power in an international interplay. Moreover, humanitarian and ethical criteria are involved, in addition to purely administrative and legal ones.

Throughout the following sections, some of the current social realities surrounding refuge are highlighted in order to understand its political and cultural aspects. The last section presents a theoretical reflection on migrant life and its repercussions in globalization from a sociological approach, with a view on certain currents of thought that address an asymmetrical construction on the concept of what is a human. The focus of this study relates to photojournalistic images that won the World Press Photo award (2015-2020), specifically from an aesthetic-symbolic analysis of those photographs that represent refugees.

DIVERSITY AS A POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION. BEHIND THE WALLS OF EUROPE

One of the conditions present all along the history of migration in Europe is the racialization and stigmatization of the foreigner (Sassen, 2013), to which is added the enormous vulnerability of refugee life. The concept set forth by Judith Butler (2009) on precarious lives is useful here, which may even have philosophical depth in a Heideggerian sense, in that human life is a constant fall, a being thrown into a world already given as is in which case, the severity of the fall is not the same for everyone. As De Marinis (2020) points out, suspicions and inquisitive practices towards the refugee, added to an enormous bureaucratization, are on the rise, which has repercussions such as uncertainty, speculation, traumatic processes, and vulnerability. According to Graeber (2015), this bureaucratization is a reduction of the life one is actually able to live, within a profusion of violent formalities. As an example of this, some refugees can spend between nine months and a year waiting for a response to their asylum applications.

Analyzing the processes that unfold along the life of a person as a refugee helps to understand the enormous North-South asymmetries and the differences that exist between States today. How long migration lasts, the component of settlement (possible, desired, or real), the imaginaries

surrounding return, bureaucratic obstacles, or administrative, architectural, or moral borders (racism, xenophobia, stigmatization) make the field of migration and, specifically, of refuge, a privileged place for understanding the ethics, the aesthetics, and the politics of the construction of diversity. De Lucas (2021) proposes, to clarify how diverse situations can be, to adjectivize on each occasion the type of migration being analyzed, be it voluntary or forced; and within those groupings, he suggests noting categories to differentiate whether migration takes place out of necessity, seeking asylum, or if it falls under a new category—as in the case of migration for environmental reasons—. Therefore, within the various types of migration, and because of its particular impact on refuge, “transit migration would be equivalent to being and feeling trapped as a result of the lack of documents and financial resources, and the unwillingness to return” (Fernández Casanueva & Juárez Paulín, 2019, p. 161).

As stated by Bauman (2003), power intertwines sovereignty with neoliberal governance, and persuades without coercion, based on calculation and risk management. Ghotme and García Sicard (2016), in analyzing the case of Syrian refugees who moved to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey for reasons of war, argue that these “are subordinated to policies that favor the interests of the actors involved: receiving more aid disguised as humanitarianism, and developing their political project without acknowledging any greater relevance to the moralistic pretensions of the international community” (p. 385). The authors put forward that insecurity and its management are issues that do not partake in the same international negotiations as the claims of refugees (even in terms of human rights). For refugees, waiting is often their only option. This waiting not only has to do with bureaucratic aspects that depend—to a greater or lesser extent—on them, but they must also wait for some change in the war, as well as in the efforts of the international community regarding possible peace and reconstruction agreements.

There is a great contradiction in Fortress Europe,⁴ which nips migration projects in the bud. The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) regulates who can benefit from international assistance and protection; it also defines the status of the person, the procedure, and which State is in charge of analyzing each application. Among the regulations, it is established that the applicant must be in European territory for the bureaucratic process to be set in motion, which represents a paradox considering the policies of detention and deportation. Many of those eligible for protection enter illegally or irregularly and, when apprehended by the authorities, are immediately deported or placed in prison-like centers for immigrants.

According to De Lucas and Naïr (2015), such control makes it possible to speak of a criminal and administrative law on the enemy, a kind of law and life that Agamben (2006) calls *nuda vida*, that is, the life that anyone can put to death while at the same time is not good as sacrifice. Looking at migration and refuge as a problem and as an obstacle, the authors mention that “migration and

⁴ The old continent is thus understood because the various policies on foreigners, and international pacts and treaties, aim to make European soil a bastion that would have to be defended against the so-called *waves*, *invasions*, or *enemies* who want to break through, these supposed enemies being the migrants and foreigners from Africa, Asia, post-Soviet Eastern European countries, among others.

asylum policies have this common thread: constructing these subjects as totally alien to us” (De Lucas & Naïr, 2015, p. 35). Discriminatory and unequal treatment finds its justification in the very fact of difference, which is understood as something negative, while there is a vision of the presence of the other as something provisional (De Lucas & Naïr, 2015). The creation of increasingly sophisticated processes for defining who is a refugee is based on the distrust of the truthfulness of the refugee in order to significantly reduce the pool of “true refugees.” This is “probably a more difficult task than one imagines, since most of the evidence—from the facts recounted to the documents presented—can be contested” (Fassin, 2013, p. 53). The notion of “false refugee”, which results in greater pressure and bureaucratization of processes, also implies a greater struggle for defense lawyers and for migrant organizations, struggle to which academics become part of by means of expert reports (De Marinis, 2020).

From 1980 onwards, asylum and refugee applications have increased in number throughout Europe, the Mediterranean being one of the places where, in addition, more deaths and disappearances of people occur compared to other border areas of the planet, since it is “the most important demographic fault line of the planet” where “a real human bloodletting” is taking place (De Lucas & Naïr, 2015, p. 20). Today we speak of threats, tides, or invasions to refer to migrant flows from poor countries to rich countries, where “the ‘other’ is represented, stereotyped as someone coming from a different race and culture” (Sassen, 2013, p. 183), and subjects are constructed as risk categories (García Brandariz & Fernández Bessa, 2010) and as scapegoats (Aliaga Sáez, 2014), among other arguments.

A specter of militarization, securitization, hyper-control and racism haunts Europe and the world. In Africa, for example, the Organization of African Unity found it necessary to expand the category of refugee, barely two decades after the UNHCR declaration, so that the term

shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, *is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence* in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality (Parro Fernández, 2008, p. 2).

As we can see, the situation and the contingency determine the regulations, and not the other way around. It is not that the person *cannot* stay in a certain place, as in the original UNHCR definition mentioned above (Parro Fernández, 2008, p. 2), but that the person’s own life *forces* him/her to leave home. Something similar occurs on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The so-called “miracle of September 2015” and its subsequent policy development has been a subject within the study of the European reality of recent years. In that year, Germany recorded the highest number of asylum applications, both in its history and in that of the European Union (EU): 1.1 million, of which “about 442 000 formally and first applied for asylum in Germany” (Pries, 2018, p. 74). According to this author, what was relevant in the case was that civil society organized itself with welcoming banners, and received the refugees with sympathy: solidarity volunteers offering food, toys, and groceries, free German lessons, accommodation in houses, and

access to soccer clubs are some of the examples of that miracle. That year, Germany, like Austria, was criticized by other member States for the huge number of people received as asylum seekers and refugees.

On the contrary, in Spain it was decided to raise the fences, as De Lucas (2016) reiterates: “wherever you go, fences” (p. 92). As an example of this, the use of barbed wire fences was intensified in Ceuta and Melilla, and migrants were even shot with rubber balls, causing the death of 15 of them. Claims for these acts brought to trial state security agents, who were found not guilty. Spain also signed outsourcing agreements with Senegal and Mauritania, while receiving support from Frontex to identify migrant flows.

After the Arab Spring and the disintegration of Libya, Hundreds of refugees arrived in Italy, while many others died at sea. In 2013, other countries criticized Italy for a shipwreck in which hundreds drowned on the island of Lampedusa. Moreover, criticism intensified because Italy decided to unilaterally implement the *Mare Nostrum* shipwreck rescue program. The following year, the refugee flows went to Greece, a country badly hit by the crises since 2008, which was also criticized for poorly managing the refugee crisis.

Pries (2018) concludes that “it was ‘organized non-responsibility’ that characterized the prevailing reaction of member States” (p. 87). As we can observe, political pacts have not shown coherence and stability in the long term, and the governments of each country are establishing the policies of how to manage the lives of their “others”, which arrive without due notice in advance. For his part, González Vega (2017) reiterates the importance of keeping in mind the persistent deficiencies at the regulatory level and in the application of international law by stating that “the refugee crisis of autumn 2015 led a significant number of States to temporarily suspend the application of freedom of movement within the EU, and to reintroduce internal border controls accordingly” (p. 35).

Likewise, there is a difference in the data between the different member States, reaching up to 94% in terms of the recognition of refugee status. In the specific case of Spain, the so-called “Aznar protocol” (Moreno Ríos, 2019, p. 13) remains in force, according to which “in principle, no asylum application submitted by a national of a member State should be examined or admitted by another member State” (González Vega, 2017, p. 46).

Although the corollary to the law on the free movement of persons in the Common Market could build common migration policies, the reality is that the criterion of sovereignty from Eurocentric modernity continues to prevail. Whenever there is a crisis, States cling to their sovereignty, for example, by closing administrative and material borders, and externalize the moral borders of racism, xenophobia, and populism against the “other.”

METHODOLOGY

The corpus of this research is constituted by a selection of refugee representations in the World Press Photo award, focused on the range from the beginning of the crisis in 2015 until 2020, with images of refugees from Armenia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. These images are analyzed at two levels: the level of stylization—through composition and perspective—, and the level of staging the refugee drama—through lighting and pose—.

In order to explain the methodological process, as well as to justify how the images were obtained for analysis and what were the reasons and criteria for selecting these and not others, the following considerations are essential:

a) The criterion that led to the selection of the World Press Photo representations of refugees for analysis was based on observing the radical differences between the representations of grief among Western citizens and those of non-Western citizens, specifically in terms of the ways in which they are made visible. The death of Western citizens is made invisible—as in the case of the images of the victims of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, or the Atocha bombings in Madrid—while the death of non-Western citizens becomes a spectacle that is displayed in an uncensored manner.

b) The criterion for choosing the time span of these images (2015-2020) has to do with the beginning of the refugee crisis and the beginning of the pandemic.

c) The criteria for choosing these images stems from the structured viewing of all images addressing the refugee theme, which were awarded between 2015 and 2020 and are available in the World Press Photo digital archive.

d) In a first selection, the study was limited to 44 images of refugees, organized chronologically. The corpus being large, it was decided to focus on refugee images within the context of the Mediterranean crisis, and so the selection was reduced to 31 images.

e) The corpus then narrowed down and restructured, no longer chronologically but categorically, according to two modes of aestheticization of pain: the stylization, and the staging of the refugee drama. After this conceptual adjustment, the images were redefined in order to deal with some examples of each category. Thus, the different compositional uses of geometric figures were reviewed in order to analyze the stylization of the refugee images. Two examples of the use of the square, two of the use of the vanishing point, two of the use of the horizontal line, and one example of the use of the triangle were obtained; to analyze staging from lighting and pose, two examples were taken from the work *The Haunted* by Adam Ferguson (2020a, 2020b).

Having explained the criteria for image selection, it is now pertinent to identify the questions that guided our research: why is it that in the World Press Photo awards only the horror of non-Western otherness is insistently and exclusively shown? Why is this horror always shown in photographs that are quite elaborate from an aesthetic perspective? Why is the voice of the discourse always Western and the subject always non-Western? These questions will serve to think about the two strategies crystallized in the photographs of the corpus: the stylization and the staging of the refugee drama.

OTHERNESS AS A VISUAL CONSTRUCTION

Before demonstrating how the political construction of refugee diversity is intimately linked to a symbolic construction of their otherness, it is necessary to point out the importance of images for social science. As Aguilar Idáñez (2016) pointed out, social representations are constructed, fundamentally, from visual discourses: in sociological research “visual metaphors emerge as a condensation of the socio-political images generated around immigration” (p. 156). In turn, Regula Burri (2012) pointed out that it is necessary to analyze images from a sociological standpoint, since sociological theory has not delved deep into images, “despite the fact that social practices are linked to visual logics” (p. 1).

In order to account for the visual logic of the socio-political aspects of migration, a set of photographs from the World Press Photo Award that reflect the refugee drama is analyzed. Before addressing this point, we are to establish a minimum context on the political construction of otherness and recall its two forms of construction: racist and multicultural.

As has been pointed out, refugees are the expression of a social and cultural diversity resulting from the profound North-South asymmetries, in turn derived from a global and unequal capitalist political-economic construction. Their geographical displacements are undoubtedly causally connected to armed conflicts in different strategic regions, and involve Western economic interests. However, one of the main issues of the refugee crisis lies in the tensions that are unleashed in the host states, where various forms of racism and xenophobia prevail. In addition to these forms of rejection, there is the fear evoked by the refugee diversity felt by citizens of the global North, a fear of the other who is different, unknown, and from whom one must protect oneself by means of militarized border policies. This landscape shows the life adrift of refugees, their being on the move, whose flight is a constant destination along a journey that oftentimes begins with the drama of war and ends with that of racism.

This racist construction has been strong in Europe; moreover, it has been one of the main issues on the agenda of far-right political parties. Although the political-economic construction of the refugee from racism is no novelty, its political-economic construction from the perspective of multiculturalism does pose some notable novelties and singularities. According to Žižek (1998), multiculturalism is a form of low-intensity and attenuated racist political construction; it is the ideology of globalizing capitalism that treats all cultures from a perspective that is certainly respectful, but also one of superiority. In other words, this author claims that multiculturalism is a neocolonial and Eurocentric strategy that assumes a universalizing view of others, and respects the particularities and essentials of each culture, albeit from a condescending and paternalistic standing:

a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a “racism with a distance”: it “respects” the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed “authentic” community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position (Žižek, 1998, p. 172).

This universalist position of Eurocentrism has been challenged from other theoretical latitudes by Wallerstein (2001), with his ideas on Eurocentrism, and by Castro-Gómez (2010), with his zero-point *hubris* critique.

The selected corpus of images falls under this second category of political construction of otherness, based on multicultural racism. Now, why and how does this multicultural racism crystallize in the photographic images of refugees awarded in the World Press Photo? In order to account for this problem, three mechanisms of political construction of otherness must be taken into account.

First of all, in all the images of this award and, of course, in the selected corpus, the pain and miseries of those who do not belong to the Western cultural orbit are unashamedly shown. It is symptomatic that in the long trajectory of this award, the dramas of the West are not shown. For example, while the images of the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 or the attacks of March 11, 2004 in Madrid are not made visible, the horrors experienced by the non-Western otherness are shown without any concealment. As Susan Sontag points out, it is deemed “obscene to show the suffering of those we consider ‘ours’, while we think of ourselves as free to look at the suffering of ‘the others’” (Sontag, 2003, p. 22). In this hypervisual Western society, where it seems that people have the right to see everything, such characteristic seems to be circumscribed exclusively to making visible the suffering of those who do not belong to this culture (Bernárdez Rodal & Moreno Segarra, 2017). From this, a pain arises, with which an “emotionally correct” empathy is thus developed that prevents reasoning about the causes of that pain experienced by the other. Somehow, exposing these images implies naturalizing the drama of refugees without explaining, problematizing, or denouncing the reasons behind the phenomenon.

Secondly, this set of images that records refugees does so from an aestheticization of pain, that is to say, the resources of composition, color, perspective, tonality, and light are used to shape a harmonic aestheticization of the horror of the other that is strongly political. However, while it is true that it is necessary to show horror as a pedagogical force (Didi-Huberman, 2004), it is also true that, in this postmodern society, it seems that the more horror is shown on the screens, the more incapable viewers become of seeing.

Third, all the images referred to in this study were recorded by Western photographers; that is, the discursive voice is not on the side of the drama. Likewise, in all cases, the drama of the others is captured from an aestheticizing perspective of Greek, Renaissance, and modern roots, and is enunciated by a Eurocentric, Western, and multicultural gaze that constructs horror politically and symbolically. Thus, both what is shown in the image—of the refugees, of the others—and the mediations of the recording media—aestheticization, harmony, composition, perspective—, as well as the individuals doing the recording—the discourse—are traversed by quasi-racist forms of power made possible by the ideological hegemony of multiculturalism.

In the light of these three mechanisms, questions arise on the need to establish limits to the political representation of the horror of the other. These issues concerning the limits to representation, the aestheticization of horror, and the possibility of an ethics of the image were already

addressed in a previous work elaborated from a series of questions: “Is it possible to configure an ethics of the image? How to articulate the domain of aesthetics with that of ethics? Are there limits to what should or should not be shown?” (Bouhaben, 2015, p. 164).

Stylization of the Refugee Drama

The strategy of stylizing the refugee drama has an extradiegetic character and, therefore, does not imply an intervention of the inners of the image: the outer form, the framing, and the composition are intervened. Photojournalism aims at direct and unmediated observation of events, consequently striving to ensure the relationship between image and reality (Newton, 2008). Efforts are made to show what is seen, as is and with no intermediaries, with the desire not to distort reality, in line with the observational mode of direct cinema, that is, based on observation and on minimizing the intervention of the filmmaker (Nichols, 1997).

No matter how realistic they may seem, within all images, there is always room for subjectivity and interpretation. What is seen in a photograph is the result of creative elaboration and interpretation (Rose, 2012). That is, despite the fact that photojournalistic images have a strong denotative character, there are always connotative values associated with them. Photography is an action that implies pragmatics and, therefore, there is always an intervention: it is not limited to the pure reproduction of reality, rather, what is shown arises from an experience and a perspective. Therefore, photography is constructed with literal, denotative, and analogical elements, as well as with interpretative, connotative, and signifying elements. Roland Barthes (1986) pointed out that connotation is the imposition of a second meaning to the photographic message from different levels of photographic production: trick effects, pose, composition, syntax, and photogenia. In the images analyzed below, connotation is expressed, above all, in the visual composition of the image.

Composing an image consists of arranging the tools according to the message to be conveyed [...] This arrangement is organized through the so-called abstract structure, which brings together the visual result of the relationships established between the elements of the visual representation (Acaso, 2006, p. 74).

Through composition, the image is stylized and ordered from the exteriority of the point of view, without having to intervene in the events being recorded. Stylization works the exteriority of the image of the refugees by means of the skeleton of abstract structures: from squares, lines, or triangles the photographer mathematizes reality.

According to Classical Greece, beauty has a mathematical character: harmony, proportion, and symmetry are the devices that allow for beauty to emerge. This mathematization of reality aimed at creating beauty had its development in the Renaissance with the ideation of perspective and, centuries later, with the invention of photography. However, there is an ethical-political problem with these geometrization strategies when they are used to capture the realities of injustice and cruelty. Imposing a geometric composition on the formless chaos of reality implies a sort of system of control, domination, and ordering; a system of aesthetic and ethical imposition on the imprecise

reality. The problem is also ethical, since the explanation of the causes of the horrors experienced by refugees is hidden to expose instead bits of understanding and order through composition.

The following images show order expressed through the compositional use of geometric figures: the square, the line, and the triangle.

Photograph 1, for example, shows the face of Ewa, a young refugee of Armenian origin, who suffered from the resignation syndrome, which plunged her into a state of catatonia. While it is true that the inner image does not appear to have been intervened, that is, the young woman does not appear to be posing, the photographer reframed her face using her parents' hands. The hands at the top are in a vertical position, while the hands at the bottom trace a horizontal line, in addition to the forearm at the top that draws a square; a reframing of the face is thus constructed. In Photograph 2, an Afghan refugee looks out the window of an abandoned wagon in Belgrade (Serbia). As in the previous image, the portrayed subject appears intentionally reframed, this time by means of the hardware and window frame of the wagon.

Photograph 1. Awakening



Note: Red lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2020 World Press Photo of the Year Nominee (Kaczor, 2020).

Photograph 2. Lives in Limbo



Note: Red lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2018 World Press Photo, General News, 3rd prize (Pistilli, 2018a).

According to Deleuze (2017), what capitalism rejects the most is disorder and that which lacks utility: it is a semiotic machine that recodes everything it does not understand. That is precisely what can be seen in the images of the World Press Photo: harsh realities that lack utility, recoded by the intervention of composition. This is a geometrization of chaos. However, in these images there is no attempt at understanding the horror, but rather an aestheticizing strategy to promote an empathy that appears to be fake and shallow. The Eurocentric and Western gaze seems to bear a guilty conscience, and probably for that reason needs to purge itself: it needs to simulate in order to purify itself. As posited by Mary Douglas (1973), it becomes necessary to place the dirt within an order. There lies the paradox: The West is the cause of the horror experienced by refugees, since it records and embellishes the image of them and “enjoys” this horror in its cultural circuits: photographic prizes, museums, art galleries.

Such stylization of the refugee drama can also be exercised by means of lines. Photograph 3 shows a group of refugees in Belgrade, Serbia, waiting in line to collect food distributed by an international group of volunteers. In Photograph 4, we find a similar composition: a group of refugees walking towards a registration center in the vicinity of the Slovenian-Croatian border. In both cases, the photographer approaches reality from an angle that allows the construction of a vanishing point that orders and structures the refugees in the same way that the Nazi military ordered and placed the prisoners upon arrival at the concentration camps: as a homogeneous mass that prevents their understanding as a sum of personalized human beings. In other words, this study points to the fact that control is not only established through State policies but also through the geometric politics of the image. The same can be said of other refugee images, which make use geometric of

forms aimed at the ordering of “socio-visual chaos”, such as the horizontal line (Photograph 5) or the triangle (Photograph 6).

Photograph 3. Lives in Limbo



Note: Red lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2018 World Press Photo, General News, 3rd prize (Pistilli, 2018b).

Photograph 4. Reporting Europe’s Refugee Crisis



Note: Red lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2016 World Press Photo, General News, 1st prize (Ponomarev, 2016a).

Photograph 5. Iraq's Battle to Reclaim its Cities



Note: Red lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2017 World Press Photo, General News, 2nd prize (Ponomarev, 2017).

Photograph 6. Reporting Europe's Refugee Crisis



Note: Red lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2016 World Press Photo, General News, 1st prize (Ponomarev, 2016b).

These techniques of framing, of linear or pyramidal composition, are just a few examples of the stylization and mathematization of the refugee horror in order to beautify it and, therefore, it can

be said that they are structures that oppress, at least symbolically, the photographed individuals. In doing so, a kind of double oppression can be observed: first political and then symbolic. This double oppression has been worked out by the filmmaker Harun Farocki in *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (1988), where he used photographs of Nazi extermination camps that were captured by the U.S. Air Force, which showed people entering the crematoria.

Through these images, symbolic violence was once again exercised on the victims. About the aerial photographs of the concentration camps, in which the individual is scarcely larger than a pixel, I wrote a brief comment: “In the grain of the photograph lies the respect and protection of the personality” (Farocki, 2013, p. 34).

A similar effect can be seen in these photographs, not by pixelation this time, but by the geometric beauty of the composition.

The oppression exerted by the image does not lie in its mathematical character—the whole history of Western art is based on the pillars of mathematical composition—, but in the intervention of an individual—the Western photojournalist—who, through a camera, enunciates and orders reality. It is he who has the power of the image, a power that is external to the “recorded” individuals, a power shared with the spectator and with the jury that qualifies the photographs, all of whom are alien to the reality referred to in the photographs. If the calling of photojournalism is to bring the image closer to reality, then it makes no sense that the devices used to capture such reality, the cameras, are not in the hands of the refugees themselves. They are the ones who are immersed in that reality and, therefore, they are the ones who should record it from their perspective, their imaginary, and their aesthetics. If one is to put oneself in the place of the other, it is not enough to look at them from the outside, it is necessary “to see with the other and let the other see” (Martín-Barbero & Corona Berkin, 2017).

The Staging of the Refugee Drama

There is a key difference between stylization and staging strategies. If in stylization geometric compositional resources are employed to embellish the human drama, in the images classified within the staging strategy a pose is imposed on the protagonists. That is to say, in stylization the intervention is formal and external, while in staging a greater degree of control is exercised in the design and in the ordering of reality, to the extent that the intervention is material and interior.

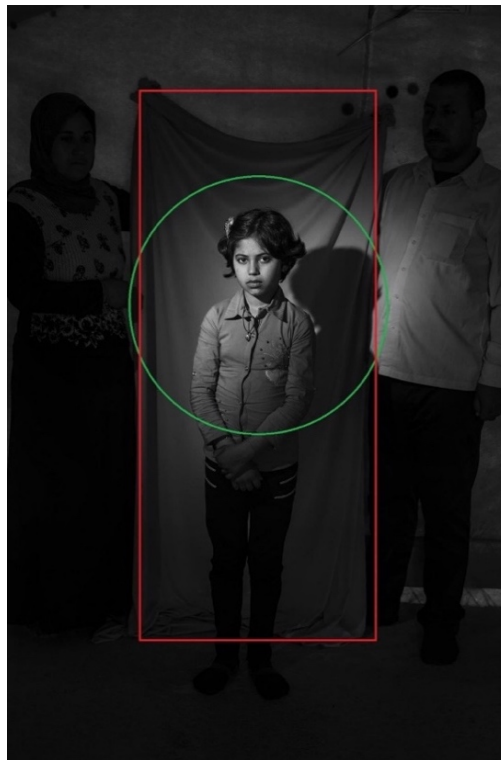
The stylization strategy employs, fundamentally, pose, and photogenia. Roland Barthes (1986) stresses that in both connotation strategies of the photographic message there is a clear intention on the part of the photographer to intervene in the image, since pose accentuates

stereotyped attitudes which form ready-made elements of signification (eyes raised heavenwards, hands clasped) [...] [whereas] in photogenia the connoted message is the image itself, ‘embellished’ (which is to say in general sublimated) by techniques of lighting, exposure and printing (Barthes, 1986, pp. 18-19).

Let us look at two photographs that use stylization strategies based on three conceptual expressions: spectacularizing, fictionalization, and discourse.

Photograph 7 is a portrait of Kristina, a girl kidnapped in 2014 by the group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who was forced into sexual slavery and subsequently released in April 2019. In the image, it can be seen that the photographer chose to work with posed portraits, which is a breach of the fundamental principle of photojournalism: safeguarding the pact between image and reality. The portrait always implies a rereading, a subjective interpretation by the photographer. It can be seen, however, that the girl, with her hands folded, is artificially overlit straight at her face, which we have outlined with a green circle. In the photograph, this light casts a shadow on the sheet held by a man and a woman—framed in a red rectangle—, thus pointing to the idea of staging. In this image it is worth questioning whether the excess of theatricality and imposture is necessary: it can be seen how the staging is aimed at the creation of a spectacle from the pose and lighting, from the ordering and harmonizing of reality: “it is the resulting object from a set of actions carried out to perform a spectacle” (Szuchmacher, 2014, p. 11). For his part, Patrice Pavis (2008) pointed out that the “totality of the scenic spectacle emanates from a single thought that conceives it, orders it, and in the end harmonizes it” (p. 6). What the photographer produces is a harmonization not only through composition but also through the regulation and codification of the portrayed body.

Photograph 7. The Haunted



Note: Red and green lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2020 World Press Photo, Portraits, 1st prize (Ferguson, 2020a).

Photograph 8, from the same series, shows Noora Ali Abbas sitting with her grandson Harreth in their tent in the Nineveh refugee camp in Iraq. As in the previous case, the poses of the protagonists, the artificial light—again delimited with a green circle—and the sheet in the background—marked with a red rectangle—accentuate the artificial nature of the photograph. The theatricality of the image makes an iconic reference to the Pietà (Buonarroti, 1499). Therefore, this image is an intertextual staging: a passage from the model to its re-reading. In any case, it constitutes a gesture of artificiality since, in order to compose this photograph, the protagonists have had to pretend and to follow the guidelines set by the author of the scene. This is, therefore, no presentation of the events, but rather the creation of a *mise-en-scène*. It is a make-up of the facts similar to what Dziga Vertov (2011) criticizes in Russian fiction: an artifice forged through narrative imagery that resorts to professional actors, sets, and literary structures. Or, as Deleuze (2018) points out when speaking of the potency of the false: a simulation that destroys reality and replaces it with a fictional account, through the function of fabulation.

Photograph 8. The Haunted



Note: Red and green lines in the photograph added by the authors.

Source: 2020 World Press Photo, Portraits, 1st prize (Ferguson, 2020b).

In both photographs 7 and 8, the discourse elaborates, shapes and stages inner reality by means of light and pose. In this *mise-en-scène* the object of the discourse is mixed with the one voicing it; that is, the recorded reality is mixed with the photographer's point of view and praxis. Benveniste (1971) defines discourse as the individual act of using language.

However, this discourse is not entirely subjective, as it is also a collective expression of the socio-cultural imaginaries and of the hegemonic political-economic perspectives in which the photographer is immersed.

The gaze concerns discourse and implies subjective positions, symbolic domination, and resistance. The image is always understood as relative to socio-cultural imaginaries. When looking and making look we select, consciously or not, places of discourse constructed and assigned as social positions: the patriarchal gaze, the dominant class gaze [...] the gaze of the individual who resists, or is complicit, or is indifferent to the domination of the other, etc. (Abril Curto, 2012, p. 28).

In sum, these images construct an empathetic gaze on the drama of the refugees based on aestheticizing resources. The symmetrical compositions of Classical and Renaissance order employed, such as the square, vanishing points, horizontal lines, and the triangle, are easier for image consumers to decode, and convey with greater ease. Similarly, the use of artificial lighting better focuses and centers the information conveyed in the image, as it frames and focuses the expression of the faces recorded.

CLOSING REMARKS

In *Derecho de fuga* (The Right to Escape), Mezzadra (2005) exposes the ambivalent character of the migrant: a figure between hero and victim, halfway between oppression and freedom. According to this author, the migrant is paradigmatic to postmodern subjectivity: “not conditioned by the full weight of history, of the community, and can cross borders, hybridize” (p. 27). This is, of course, a somewhat optimistic vision in the political construction that the author wants to make towards an expansion of rights—the right to have rights—starting among other things with the power to leave the place of origin and settle in a new destination. Likewise, Mezzadra (2005) conceptualized it as “becoming migrant”, since the work carried out by migrants has a social condition shared by non-migrants: individuals with precarious jobs lacking stability. Moreover, we must not forget “how their condition is deeply characterized by circumstances of material and symbolic deprivation, by processes of domination and exploitation, as well as by specific dynamics of exclusion and stigmatization” (Mezzadra, 2005, p. 46). What is moreover striking about this issue is that this “right to escape” claimed by Mezzadra is far from being achieved. Many people do not even have the possibility of escaping from their places of origin, and many others do not consider traveling away or leaving their home as way of escaping, but rather as being dragged into new situations of vulnerability. In such contexts, we cannot talk about a right aiding them; if there is one, it is not being fulfilled.

Under the clarifying subtitle *Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Saskia Sassen’s *Expulsions* (2015) addresses the networks of transactions that shape today’s capitalism and result in the abrupt and forced departure of large masses of people around the world:

the countless displaced people *warehoused* in formal and informal refugee camps, the minorized groups in rich countries who are *warehoused* in prisons, and the able-bodied unemployed men and women and *warehoused* in ghettos and slums [italics added] (p. 13).

Sassen uses the concept of “warehousing”—the same concept used by human rights activists—to refer to people because she considers that the system that expels them treats them as commodities, as dirty and out-of-place matter that must be removed so as not to disturb. These expulsions are a process of “savage sorting” (p. 14). Likewise, reaffirming the initial criticism that was pointed out towards the definition of refugee by UNHCR, Sassen (2015) argues that this international agency leaves out those displaced by land acquisitions in the global South, those displaced in the North by debt, and those displaced by climate change (p. 68). It should be noted that the increase in expulsion dynamics goes hand in hand with displacement-normalizing dynamics. The consequences of refuge are therefore increasingly perceived as a matter of course, thus increasing the difficulty of tackling the problem and focusing it on people’s lives, and not on the supposed identity of States. This reaffirms, for the European case being contextualized here, that the European community is more about interests than about belonging. Despite not being a new phenomenon, the category of refugee is today increasingly more questionable than ever before (De Lucas, 2017, p. 66).

In this process that normalizes the misery of refugees, the imaginaries that are being constructed on the basis of cultural industries are complicit. These imaginaries go along the lines of “moral boundaries,” “understood as the set of images, actions, discursive forms, mental schemes, emotions, feelings, and symbols that constitute shared social representations” (Buraschi & Aguiar, 2016, p. 131). The case of the World Press Photo award is highly significant since, as analyzed here, its *modus operandi* is to show the world the misery of others in an aestheticizing manner, the misery of those who do not belong to the selfhood of the West. In the images on refugees selected for our study, we analyzed how their drama is embellished by means of stylization and staging without explaining the reason for such state of things. If we look at the causes, at the *quid prodest* of each of these horrors of the world, we will be able to see that the predatory drive of capitalism lies behind all cases.

The images selected not only point at these spaces of domination, but also construct them; the ways of looking undoubtedly reveal a form of multicultural racism. Both the strategy of stylization and staging are essential to the multicultural piety of capitalism. Jacques Rancière (2010) pointed out the difficulties of making political images of protest because, along the lines of what Deleuze in turn pointed out, images of protest are phagocytized by the machinery of the spectacle, and thus their critical perspective is deactivated. In the end, the logic of the spectacle absorbs everything, and it is difficult to escape from it. As Bourdieu (1989) pointed out, “each group or each class orders and organizes individual practice by conferring on it functions that respond to its own interests” (p. 5).

How, then, can we circumvent this difficulty of creating political images of the refugee drama? Two ideas are briefly and schematically noted here as a final colophon to the research of this study. First, these dominant visual forms that promote the inferiorization, objectification, and racialization of the subalternized, could be put in crisis by means of “a transparent visual dialogue between different knowledge and cultures [...] of agreements and disagreements established between cultural groups and differential subjectivities” (Barriendos, 2011, p. 14).

Secondly, one could propose ways not so much of seeing the other, but of seeing with the other. The works of Martín-Barbero and Sarah Corona (2017) exemplify that practice: it is about giving the means of image production to the subalternized, in order to see how they create their own images and how they reflect their environment.

You cannot access others if not with them. And seeing with others involves deploying the tools of social research in a process in which the actors interpret such tools, put them at their service, transform and make them their own, enter into conflict (p. 77).

Aguilar Idáñez (2016) has worked with this idea of “seeing with the other”; he has carried out visual works with immigrant collectives calling into question the asymmetries and hierarchies of power by including the perspective of the actors involved themselves, otherwise usually absent in the discourses established from power.

Thus, if we are to reflect on the diversity and otherness of refugees, from outside the low-intensity racism of hegemonic multiculturalism, it would be necessary to begin by giving them the space to voice themselves, the camera, and the image. Or wait for refugees to take them over.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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