

## **Spectacular Images of the ‘Refugee Crisis’**

**Dr. Antigoni Memou**

### **Abstract:**

The current ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe has generated an abundance of photographs, which have been circulated in print and digital media since 2015. This article focuses on two of the most reproduced of these photographs: that taken in September 2015 of Aylan Kurdi’s dead body near the Turkish coast and a photograph of refugees walking along the Croatian-Slovenian border which was used by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) during the summer of 2016 as part of their pro-Brexit campaign. The article examines the repeated visual tropes which perpetuate stereotypes of refugees as either miserable, helpless victims or threatening subjects. It further questions the ways in which the ‘individual’ and the ‘collective’ have been framed in these photographs, in ways which contribute to dominant and uncontested visual narratives of the ‘refugee crisis.’ The paper contends that the passive acceptance of these reified representations of the refugee experience in these media-saturated times equates to uncritical approval of the sociopolitical conditions from which these photographs are generated. Finally, it argues that only through the rejection of such spectacular images can we hope to open up a serious, critical, public debate about the ‘refugee crisis’, the necessity of which is becoming increasingly urgent.

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The record number of migrants and refugees, who attempted to reach Europe throughout 2015 and 2016 via the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea is the largest migrant exodus since the Second World War. The ‘Arab Spring uprisings’ in 2011, ongoing political unrest in the MENA region and the civil war in Syria have all contributed significantly to the acceleration of the phenomenon, which has been misleadingly labelled the ‘migrant crisis’ or the ‘refugee crisis.’ (Heller & Pezzani, 2016) What has, in fact, undergone a profound crisis is the current EU border regime. (Heller & Pezzani, 2016 p. 1; De Genova 2016, 34) The militarisation of borders and intensification of border controls, since the implementation of the Schengen and Dublin Conventions in the 1990s, has resulted in refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean using high-risk clandestine strategies. From early 2015, the intensification of rescue operations and border surveillance led by Frontex—the European Border Agency, has failed to prevent the highly dangerous methods of human traffickers, which have resulted in tragic shipwrecks and the deaths of thousands of people.<sup>1</sup> (Heller & Pezzani, 2016 pp. 15–16) On reaching Europe, migrants are either categorised by the authorities as economic migrants seeking employment, or asylum seekers fleeing war zones. They encounter stringent, bureaucratic EU migration systems, which may disqualify them and label them ‘non-citizens’—categorised as ‘deportable’ and ‘undesirable’ (De Genova 2013, p. 1181).

This current ‘refugee crisis’ has been visualised through an abundance of photographs taken by photojournalists, professional photographers, NGO professionals, aid volunteers and less

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<sup>1</sup> Heller and Pezzani examined four major shipwrecks that took place on October 3 and 11, 2013 and April 12 and 18, 2015. According to their study, these dates signal major shifts in the policies and practices implemented with regard to the EU’s external borders. In the aftermath of the 2015 shipwrecks, EU member-state assistance diminished, and rescue services were partially privatized. The study found that 3195 people met their deaths when attempting to cross the Mediterranean in 2014; this total was exceeded by 3772 deaths in 2015. (Heller & Pezzani, 2016 pp. 16-22)

commonly, by refugees themselves. Photographs depicting people on boats, being stopped and confronted by the police at European borders have been widely reproduced within the public domain. Such photographs have commonly reached Western audiences after complicated journeys of dissemination. This article focuses on two recent iconic photographs representing the ‘refugee crisis.’ The first is of three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi’s dead body, photographed off the Turkish coast on 2 September 2015. The second is of a crowd of refugees walking along the Croatian–Slovenian border, a photograph that was used by UKIP as part of their pro-Brexit campaigning during the summer of 2016. This paper examines the ways in which these two photographs were circulated and became symbolic of the ‘refugee crisis’, giving contemporary relevance to longstanding debate about photography’s role in testimony. The paper also asks whether the visibility of these photographs, which raised the European public’s awareness about the ‘crisis’ and gave rise to expressions of popular sentiment, might intensify the mobilisation of actions by the European public that seek to counter right-wing narratives around migration. Finally, the paper questions the ways the ‘individual’ and the ‘collective’ have been framed in these photographs, in ways that perpetuate stereotypical representations of refugees.

### **The Individual Refugee, the Humanitarian and the Media**

Within hours, #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik (‘Humanity Washed Ashore’) became the top trending hashtag of 2 September 2015. The tag accompanied Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of a drowned three-year-old boy, whose body had been washed up on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey. The boy, Aylan Kurdi, was one of twelve presumed-Syrian refugees, who included Aylan’s mother and

brother, all of whom drowned while attempting to cross the sea between Bodrum and the Greek island of Kos. Turkish Dogan News Agency (DHA) photographer Nilüfer Demir took a number of photographs of the bodies of Aylan and his brother, including a photograph of Aylan's body face down in the sand with his small palms upturned and open, and another of a Turkish coastguard, carefully carrying the lifeless boy inland. Thousands of people re-tweeted these distressing images in the first few hours of their circulation, provoking emotional responses from millions of people, veering from anger to tears, from sympathy to shock.<sup>2</sup>

The photographs were reproduced by several mainstream newspapers on 3 September, making the front pages of a number of national newspapers across the globe. The majority of newspapers published the photograph depicting the Turkish coastguard with Aylan's body in his hands.<sup>3</sup> A smaller number published either the photograph showing Aylan's body with the coastguard approaching,<sup>4</sup> or a cropped version—a close-up of the boy's lifeless body.<sup>5</sup> The headlines highlighted the human devastation and loss of life: 'It's Life and Death' read the headline of British tabloid *The Sun*, the cover of which juxtaposed a photograph of a newborn baby with the photograph of the coastguard carrying Aylan. 'Tiny Victim of a Human Catastrophe,' read the headline of the UK tabloid *The Daily Mail*. Other media outlets attempted to capture the sentiments

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<sup>2</sup> More on the ways that the image was circulated on social media and the responses it received, even less sympathetic ones see: Part I: Social Media Responses, in (Vis & Goriunova 2015)

<sup>3</sup> The American: *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*; The Argentinian: *La Nacion*, *La Nueva*, *Los Andes*, *Uno*; The Belgian: *De Standaard*; The Brazilian: *A Tarde*, *O Estado de St. Paulo*, *Correio Braziliense*; The British: *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, *Daily Express*; The Chilean: *La Tercera*; The Colombian: *El Tiempo*; The Dutch: *De Morgen*; The Greek: *Η Αυγή*, *Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*; The Israeli: *Haaretz*; The Spanish: *El País*, *La Nueva España*, *La Vanguardia*.

<sup>4</sup> The British: *The Independent*; The French: *Le Soir*; The Mexican: *Reforma*; The Middle Eastern: *The Gulf News*; The Scottish: *The National*; The Spanish: *El Correo*, *El Mundo*; The Turkish: *Milliyet*.

<sup>5</sup> The Belgian: *Het Nieuwsblad*; The Greek: *Τα Νέα*; The Irish: *Irish Examiner*; The Turkish: *Hürriyet*.

generated from viewing the photograph: ‘An Image that Shakes Europe’s Conscience,’ read *El País*; ‘The Shameful Photograph’ and ‘Unbearable’ were the headlines of *El Correo* and the UK’s *The Daily Mirror* respectively. *Le Monde* is an interesting exception among the newspapers who published a photograph related to the refugee crisis. On the 5 September, instead of Demir’s photographs, the editors chose to publish a photograph depicting a man holding on his shoulder a girl (presumably his daughter) with a teddy bear within an airplane. The man presumably Syrian looks straight to the camera while the girl looks away towards the other passengers present in the background. The headline read: ‘Migrants: A Chance for the Economy.’ *Le Monde* invoked the concept of family, which, as Bussard notes, has dominated the linguistic and visual discourse around the refugee crisis. (Bussard 2017, p. 20). Bussard argued that the graphic and simple nature of Demir’s photographs of Aylan and the similarity of Aylan’s clothing (a red t-shirt and blue trainers) to that of European children his age, renders the photographs compelling and easily to identify with for European audiences (Bussard 2017, p. 20). *Le Monde*’s photograph also fits within the visual tropes dominant in the coverage of the refugee crisis up until Aylan’s death: the refugee crisis has been mostly covered either without any visual representations accompanying the reporting and analysis, or, the photographs used tend to represent living migrant people. Therefore, the 2015 publication of photographs of the body of Aylan Kurdi in the European media can be regarded as a significant shift in the ways border-crossings and migration have been represented in the European media (Lenette and Miskovic 2016, p.3; Lenette and Cleland 2016, p. 76).

Demir’s photographs of Aylan can be argued to have two distinct effects. Firstly, they reaffirm the fact that thousands of refugees—including young children—are dying in their efforts to reach Europe. *The National*’s headline: ‘The Reality,’ and *The Guardian*’s ‘The Shocking, Cruel Reality

of the Refugee Crisis,' emphasise that the photographs of Aylan provide evidence of an atrocity—not only the death of Aylan, but of thousands of refugees.<sup>6</sup> Each of Demir's images of Aylan therefore 'produces Death while trying to preserve life' (Barthes 2000, p. 92). Secondly, the emphasis in the photographs on the human losses caused by the crisis can be argued to obscure the complex conditions that caused and continue to maintain the crisis. These conditions are sociopolitical—not a result of simple human misfortune or natural disaster. The European Union's Southern borders migration policies and practices have had a detrimental effect since 2015 on a substantially growing number of migrant people, including children and infants, who have lost their lives attempting to reach Europe. The ending of operations run and funded by EU member states that rescued migrant people in the Mediterranean Sea, and the privatization of EU agency rescue operations since 2015 (now run under contract by companies such as Frontex, the European Border Agency) has contributed to the increased loss of human life (Heller & Pezzani, pp. 20-21). The lack of an organised system for the reception of refugees has resulted in violent scenes on national borders, dire living conditions in reception centers and detention camps and in thousands of unaccompanied children arriving at the borders of Europe.

Taking Aylan's case as representative of the whole 'crisis' is a typical instance of Western photojournalism's individualistic rhetoric, according to which complex sociopolitical phenomena are represented as personal misfortunes, towards which viewers are expected to respond sympathetically. Iconic photographs of representative individuals, along with stories that describe

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<sup>6</sup> According to the International Organisation for Migration, 3784 deaths were recorded in the Mediterranean in 2015 and were increased to 5098 in 2016. Available at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean> (Accessed on 20th August 2017).

these subjects' experiences of a disaster, famine or war, led the typical major news stories of the twentieth century (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, p. 90). Harman and Lucaites have elaborated the mechanisms through which a photograph of a representative individual within a specific situation can become iconic to the extent that the 'iconic representation becomes the event itself' (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, p. 90). In their words: 'the single figure becomes the event, the era, and a pattern of civic perceptions and public response. Instead of the long chains of discourse that constitute public debate, the image becomes the means for incorporating public opinion into a civic performance' (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, p. 91). In this respect, the iconic image provokes a strong emotional response, while at the same time it displaces the event that preceded the photograph, by becoming the event itself. During the days that followed its release by Demir, the photographs of Aylan became such an 'event', one that should serve to remind us that photographs of suffering or dying children, accompanying stories of famine, poverty and conflict are mainstays of the individualistic rhetoric of Western photojournalism—and of Western news stories, more generally speaking. There are several famous cases of a single photograph of one suffering child being held up as representative of an entire, complex sociopolitical situation. The vulnerability of an endangered child shown in such a photograph is supposed to confront the spectator with an ultimate demand for protection. The tenderness and cautiousness with which the Turkish coastguard carries Aylan's lifeless body alludes to Aylan's need for such protection, and emphasises the tragedy of its belated arrival, as well as the impossibility for the photographer and the audience of taking any action that could now change the terrible outcome of Aylan's journey.

The response of *The New York Times*' readers to the publication in 1993 of Kevin Carter's photograph of a Sudanese child illustrates this point further. Carter covered the famine in Sudan

as an independent photojournalist. He photographed a half-naked, severely undernourished child being observed by a vulture. The photograph suggests that the bird is waiting to take advantage of the child's imminent death. The absence in the photograph of any adult intervention to prevent the vulture attacking the child intensifies the impression of the child's extreme vulnerability, and the photograph raised questions about the extent to which a photographer has an ethical responsibility to take action to assist a subject. These questions were posed by angry NYT readers when the photograph was published on the 26 March, 1993 to illustrate an article on Sudan's Civil War and the country's resulting humanitarian crisis. The newspaper's readers reacted strongly, criticising Carter for apparently allowing the child to suffer in order, many assumed, to take his emotive shot. Carter received the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for the photograph. He took his own life in 1994; and his untimely death was arguably associated with the negative fame he received after the publication of this picture.

The role of the photojournalist is, in this case, clearly that of the mediator delivering often graphic photographs showing violence, pain and death—that is, information about a group of powerless, vulnerable and disposed people, to another, more powerful group. As Martha Rosler has aptly put it, 'documentary testifies to the bravery or the manipulateness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble. Or who, like the astronauts, entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go' (Rosler 2004, p. 180). Since the 1970s, Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula have been among the most influential critics of the function of documentary photography within a liberal state; their critiques have formed an integral part of their efforts to rethink the documentary genre, and to reveal its institutional and discursive limits. In a series of influential essays, they

highlighted that the representations of powerless, vulnerable and dispossessed people have been framed by liberal rhetoric (Rosler, 2004; Sekula, 1984). The power relations embedded in these practices are those resulting from the fundamental inequality that exists between the photographer and the photographed subject, who is rendered a mute and passive victim of the photographer (Rosler 2004).

A similarly unequal balance of power can be argued to exist in the relationship between a photograph's viewer/s and its subject/s. Photojournalistic images of famine, poverty and conflict in faraway continents have an uncomfortable link to anthropological documents of the past, which objectified their subjects for a colonial, affluent audience. Photography's creation of a spectatorship of 'distant calamities' is a quintessentially 'modern experience', as Susan Sontag has famously argued (Sontag 2003, pp. 62-3). Sontag has contributed significantly to these debates in her books *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which she argues that in advanced capitalist societies, citizens are exposed to an endless flow of photographs of suffering, which have turned the spectator into a passive viewer, a voyeur of the 'pain of others' (Sontag 1979 & 2003). Overexposure to photographs of suffering consequently desensitizes the viewer, making them look away. Beyond its voyeuristic appeal, the exposure to the suffering of the 'Other' can also act as reassurance about the viewer's comparative safety, and superior social status (Sontag 2003, p. 89; Rosler 2004, p. 179). Martha Rosler describes this effect eloquently: 'these photographs act a little like a horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind. (It is them, not us.)' (Rosler 2004, p. 179).

The same criticism can be applied to the use of photographs of starving, helpless children in the media appeals by charities and non-governmental aid agencies, which are omnipresent in the Western media and seek to target an affluent audience. Sourced from highly visible and mediatized conflict and war zones, these photographs are used by NGOs and charitable aid organisations to maintain their ‘self-perpetuating institutions,’ and often serve the ‘interests of those in power rather than helping victims in need’ (Demos 2011, n.p.). The photographs selected for use in such campaigns frequently feature suffering children, and imply that not only they, but the citizens of their country as a whole (normally developing countries, in the Global South) are, in general, helpless victims. The circulation of such photographs in the economically more powerful countries of the Global North mediates the already existing unequal relationship between the Global North and the Global South. The global image industry fueled by this kind of photography perpetuates a vicious cycle of the objectification of the people presented in such photographs (who are represented in terms that tend to suggest that they lack agency) and sympathy from their privileged spectators, who are reduced to depoliticized charitable donors (Demos 2011, n.p.).

Aylan’s story has been used in such a fashion by *The Daily Telegraph*, which presented their readers with a list of charitable actions they could take. Accompanying the article with three photographs of Aylan smiling alongside his brother and father, the newspaper urged its readers to act by donating food, clothing and bedding to the Calais refugee camp, contribute to an Amazon Wish List or a crowd-funding campaign, or even more actively, cycle to Calais, drop off supplies and come back. There was also an option to sign a petition calling for the British government to accept more refugees (Horton 2015). Targeting a highly influential international audience, Alfredo Jaar’s public intervention in Art Basel in Switzerland aimed to alter public perception of the

‘refugee crisis’ by distributing 12,000 small blue cardboard boxes across the city. Jaar had volunteers approach members of the public, including the affluent art fair attendees, who were offered the box, and urged to donate to MOAS, a charity that sends drones across the Mediterranean Sea to identify refugee boats in order to provide appropriate aid. On one side of the box, writing was reminding the viewers that the gift can change them followed by an excerpt from an editorial in the Italian daily *La Stampa* written by journalist Mario Calabresi: “This photograph [of Aylan] demands that each and every one of us should stop for a moment and face what is happening on the beaches where we spent our vacations. We cannot procrastinate; [...] This is the last chance for Europe’s leaders to live up to the challenge of history. And it is a chance for every one of us to take stock of the ultimate meaning of existence’ (Binlot 2016). The other sides of the box were covered with a photograph of the beach where Aylan was found dead—his photograph is deliberately omitted.

Jaar had previously created installations and public interventions in which he challenged his viewers to rethink the power of photography and in particular their relationship to the image and its subject(s), with the aim of debunking the politics of representation. His complex installation *The Sound of Silence* (1993) presented Carter’s infamous photograph of the Sudanese child with the vulture within a cubical darkened room with fluorescent lights and text which raised questions about the ethical considerations of the act of viewing such a photograph. Taking a critical stance towards Rancière’s argument that spectacular images of misery may generate a ‘different way of looking when recontextualised’ (referring to the recontextualisation of Carter’s photograph in Alfredo Jaar’s *The Sound of Silence* installation), TJ Demos argues that we need to extend our criticism to the framework within which these images were produced, disseminated and received

(Demos 2013, p. 114). In his words, ‘if we do “bother to see”, then we need to look beyond the single image and, progressing from image to economy, take account of how “bearing witness” may play into the problematic logic of humanitarianism and documentarism in the service of empathy and hope’ (Demos 2013, p. 115). The acceptance of our position as spectators and of ‘the ethical demands made on us—to be appalled at the horror, to sympathize, to bear witness—we have already been sucked in the logic of humanitarianism and risk, becoming complicit in its larger situation’ (Demos 2013, p. 115–6). In the case of Aylan, ‘if we do “bother to see”’, we have to look beyond the frame of the image and attempt to understand that the global flow of images of suffering, dying and dead refugees stems from and is sustained through these relationships of inequality. This, in turn, would require a critique of the wider sociopolitical and economic framework within which these relationships of inequality operate in the first place, and a questioning of our own position within that framework. But this may seem a rather complicated way to discover means of narrowing the gulf of inequality and the distance between us— as privileged viewers—and the victims—as subjects to be looked at—which is the presupposition of any possible movement from compassion to solidarity and political action, as Hannah Arendt has argued (Arendt 1990, p. 85).

If we fail to critically question this framework and our position within it, we will continue being passive viewers of photographs depicting the ‘refugee crisis’ across all media. A case in point is the circulation of a still image showing a little boy, identified as Omran Daqneesh, covered in dust and blood and in a state of total shock in the back of an ambulance following a bombing raid in Aleppo in 2016, nearly a year after the publication of Aylan’s photograph. The still was extracted from a video circulated by the Aleppo Media Centre, an anti-government, citizen journalist,

activist group, and was shared by more than 12,000 people on social media. (Hunt 2016) The case showed that while social media may have opened up new possibilities for the circulation of photographs and their reframing through debate and discussion, they have often been subsumed by the same mechanisms of an economy of empathy. While such images may provoke an affective response and have an arguably ephemeral effect on public opinion, they do not result in any ‘sustained change in public discourse’ (Burns 2015, p. 38). As Burns has shown in her report on the reception of Aylan’s image, the impact of this photograph on public opinion was short-lived, with only 9% of the people who reported seeing Aylan’s photograph expressing positive views towards the arrival of Syrian refugees’ in the U.K. (Burns 2015, p. 38). The publication of photographs of refugee children on *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express*, which questioned the real age of unaccompanied refugee minors, only highlighted the short-lived impact of Aylan’s image and reminds us how photographs of suffering refugees can become an integral part of a xenophobic and alt-right discourse.

### **The Border Between the Individual and the Crowd**

On 23 October, 2015, Getty Images photographer Jeffrey Mitchell took a photograph of a crowd of migrants being escorted by police to the Brežice refugee camp in Slovenia. The refugees were directed to Slovenia some days after Hungary closed its border to them. Slovenia is a country subject to the European Union’s Schengen Agreement treaty, whose provisions resulted in limited border checks between signatory EU member states. Thousands of migrants arriving by train had

to walk for eight kilometers through fields across the border of Croatia with Slovenia until they reached the refugee camp in Brežice. Mitchell took the photograph from a bridge using the right lenses to compress the crowd. The migrants—the great majority, men—are very close to each other and some faces look out and beyond the crowd in agony. There is no obvious heterogeneity in terms of gender, race or class, which destabilizes the group. Mitchell took a number of photographs of the human trail in the days that followed, capturing images that depicting women and children as well as men, as the migrants endured the hardship of long, cold journeys.<sup>7</sup>

It is, nonetheless, the photograph of the crowd that became known to a wider public, since it was selected by UKIP for a pro-Brexit campaign poster in the summer of 2016. Accompanied by the slogan ‘We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders’, the poster underlined the party’s anti-EU political platform. The poster became widely reproduced in the media, primarily through a photograph of UKIP’s leader, Nigel Farage, posing in front of it. Several national newspapers published this photograph of Farage in the weeks preceding the UK referendum on EU membership. Farage is shown standing stationary in front of the poster; his stillness is in contrast to the moving crowd of migrating people shown the poster. Once disseminated in the public domain, politicians, journalists and the general public reacted strongly, accusing UKIP of xenophobic, race-based discrimination and the promotion of hatred. Twitter users and media commentators have highlighted the similarities that the poster bears with Nazi propaganda films warning about the ‘Jewish threat.’

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<sup>7</sup> For more Mitchell’s photographs see Getty Images: <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/refugee?excludenudity=true&mediatype=photography&phrase=refugee&sort=mostpopular> (Accessed 10 September 2017)

Several photographs were circulated in media and exhibitions depicting refugees as a homogenous mass—rather than as a group of individuals. The refugees are shown in the photographs packed into boats or trains, queueing on the Greece-Macedonia border or walking along the Balkan route. While many such images include women and children, the crowd depicted in Mitchell's photograph is predominantly of men. In addition, photographs of crowds can be seen as part of a series of images printed in mass circulation newspapers, for example Behrakis's photographs of refugees arriving in the Greek Islands, which were published in *The Guardian*, or Ponomarev's reportages, which appeared in *The New York Times* and as part of the exhibition 'A Lens on Syria', held at the Imperial War Museum in London.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Mitchell's photograph, we have an example of a photograph of migrancy taken out of the realm of photoreportage and recontextualised through its deployment in a political campaign, for explicitly political purposes.

The use of Mitchell's photograph in the UKIP campaign foregrounded a striking contrast between the individual—Farage—and the crowd of refugees, which appears to be moving uncontrollably towards Farage, and by implication onwards, towards us, the viewers. This reading of the image is at variance with the reality of events shown in the photograph—the migrants were in fact being lead into a detention camp by the Croatian police. The migrants were watched over by police, who are not visible in the photograph, and so the photograph can appear to suggest to the viewer that

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<sup>8</sup> Such photographs can be found in many photoreportages, which show different aspect of this big exodus. Indicatively see: Reuters Greek photojournalist Yannis Behrakis's coverage of the 'crisis': <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/pictures-of-the-year-yannis-behrakis-idUSRTX1ZMSF>; Russian, World Press Photo, Sergey Ponomarev's photography for New York Times: <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2016/general-news/sergey-ponomarev>. His exhibition at the Imperial War Museum was held between <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/sergey-ponomarev-a-lens-on-syria>

the crowd's movement is self-directed, and uncontrolled. The young men's dark skin operates as a signifier of the (racialised) 'Other'; in the context of UKIP's anti-migration campaigning, they are held up as objectified 'difference' (racial, cultural, religious). In the photograph showing Farage in front of the poster, they contrast starkly with his individual figure, whose age, race and appearance is intended to signify a particular type of 'Britishness', if not Britain itself, apparently under threat from the migrants. Uncontrolled migration is therefore being invoked by UKIP as 'something to be feared, from the perspective of the bourgeois individualist subject, because it threatens desubjectification on the primary level' (Schnapp & Tiews M. 2006, p. 321-2).

This relationship between the individual and the crowd is also mediated by the implied presence of the border. In spite of the slogan of the poster, the border along which the refugees are depicted is not a UK border. Even more importantly, there is no physical border operating in the photograph as line of demarcation, which is indexically represented in this UKIP campaign photograph, but not in the photograph taken by Mitchell. The border, in this instance, is not just a demarcation line, a 'thing', such as a wall, a fence or a bridge, but a social relationship mediated by things (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 6-7), and by extension, by images. Similarly, it is not visualized as a wall, a barbed wire fence or even a border checkpoint, as customarily depicted in photojournalistic images and documentary photographs that show borders, such as that between Mexico and the United States or the borders of the occupied Palestinian territories. The border here is imaginary, and pictorially represented as a relationship between Farage and the refugees, and it is enacted through the unequal, raced and class differences between the individual / Farage and the crowd / migrant people. The border is constructed pictorially as a striking contrast between those who are inside the border—in this case Farage—and those who are outside the border—in this case, the refugees

walking along the Croatian-Slovenian border. This enactment of the border at the level of representation reinforces Balibar's argument that nowadays, not only do borders become dislocated and ubiquitous; they are also transported beyond material borderlines (Balibar 2009, p. 203). Mezzadra and Neilson have written about the proliferation of borders in the contemporary world; they consider borders as 'complex social institutions', which are crossed and reinforced through a wide range of practices (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, p. 128).

Migration studies scholar De Genova refers to the enactment and performance of the border through enforcement practices beyond borderlines as a 'Border Spectacle': 'As the border is effectively everywhere', De Genova claims, 'so also is the spectacle of its enforcement and therefore its violation, rendering migrant illegality even more unsettlingly ubiquitous' (De Genova 2013, 1183). De Genova explains how 'border and immigration enforcement systematically activates the spectacle of 'violations' that lend 'illegality' its fetishistic objectivity' (De Genova 2013, p. 1183). According to him, 'Border Spectacle' involves a constellation of images of patrols, raids, detentions and deportations across territorial borders, as well as much more ubiquitous, spectacular practices of law enforcement and its subsequent violation (De Genova 2013, pp. 1183-1184). There is an apparent contradiction between the constellation of images and discursive formations, which supply the spectacle of migrant 'illegality', and the 'sustained recruitment of "illegal" migrants as undocumented labour' (De Genova 2013, p. 1185).

Thus, while the European economy needs migrant labour, its policies effectively seek, to not only attract but also discourage migrants, 'which means installing them in a condition of permanent

insecurity’ (Balibar 2009, p. 203). Sandro Mezzadra argues that new forms of war across borders are taking place, illustrated by the increased death rates seen amongst migrants, and the violent procedures involved in border control and security policies, which have resulted from the implementation of the Schengen Agreement and the militarization of the EU’s external border (Mezzadra, quoted in Balibar 2009, p. 202). This warfare can also be argued to be manifest in the aggressive border enforcement exercised by countries bordering ‘Fortress Europe’—enforcement that has often been outsourced by the EU (Mezzadra, quoted in Balibar 2009, p. 202). While these practices target illegal migrants, they also have a serious effect on ‘legitimate’ asylum seekers and refugees, rendering them in states of permanent insecurity. This insecurity extends to the *insiders* by transforming migrants ‘into subjects and objects of fear, *experiencing fear* of being rejected and eliminated, and *inspiring fear* in the ‘stable’ populations’ (Balibar 2009, p. 203).

Seen against the background of a spatial and bodily politics of fear, and actual politics of control dominant since 11 September 2001, the photographic portrayal of refugees as a threat to EU member state economic and social prosperity has become characteristic of nationalist-populist and far-right political parties. UKIP’s Brexit campaign poster can be seen alongside other alt-right parties’ campaigns throughout Europe and the US, which have effectively used ‘provocative visual posters depicting immigrants as “criminal foreigners” or a “threat to the nation”, in some countries and contexts conflating the image of the immigrant with that of the Islamist terrorist’ (Doerr 2017, p. 316). Doerr argues that, besides the crucial role that the visual has played in this area within national contexts, crucial parallels can be drawn from how the visual has facilitated international alt-right networks, extremist groups and activists (Doerr 2017). UKIP’s Brexit campaign poster from 2016 can be seen as an integral part of a media-saturated, discursive regime, which belongs

to a larger sociopolitical procedure, and generates and sustains the distinctions between the legal and desirable citizen and the ‘unwanted’, ‘undesirable’ and ‘deportable’ ‘non-citizen’.

### **3. Photography as a Social Relationship**

The two photographs discussed here are fleeting, fragmented, incomplete flashes of the complex reality of the current ‘refugee crisis.’ Photographic representations of that crisis have regularly appeared in both traditional and social media, as well as galleries and exhibition spaces over the last two years. These photographs do not tell a comprehensive story about the living refugee experience. What they offer us, instead, is a highly restricted glimpse at the migrant experience and at the social relationship between European citizens and migrants; that is, between those who live inside ‘Fortress Europe’ and those who embark on dangerous trips seeking to enter it. This relationship is heavily mediated by images in the Debordian sense (Debord 1994, p. 12). Debord argued that in societies in which modern conditions prevail, the social relationship between people is concealed by images. Debord’s concept of spectacle does not mean the abundance of images that circulate in a capitalist society—a notorious and frequent misunderstanding of his work, commonly seen in media and art historical literature—rather, it proclaims ‘the predominance of appearances.’ In Debord’s words, ‘the Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (Debord 1994, p. 12). Debord made clear that ‘the spectacle’ is not auxiliary to our social lives—it constitutes ‘society’s real unreality’ and the ‘prevailing model of social life’ (Debord 1994, p. 13). The spectacle is the perfect image of the ruling economic order and both its form and content ‘serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system’ (Debord 1994, p. 13). According to Debord, not only does the

spectacle justify the existing sociopolitical conditions, it also demands from us, as citizens, the passive acceptance of these images. In his words, the spectacle ‘is immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite to dialogue’ (Debord 1994, p. 17).

The two photographs (of Aylan Kurdi and Farage with UKIP’s Brexit poster) discussed in this paper seem to operate in a *spectacular* way in the Debordian sense, as they conceal a social relationship between the insiders and the outsiders, between legal citizens and illegal ‘non-citizens.’ This relationship is mediated by the images we view on social and mass media, apparatuses that have ‘nothing neutral’ about them; they answer ‘precisely to the needs of the spectacle dynamics.’ (Debord 1994, p. 19) The spectators are then, arguably, alienated from the contemplated subject/object and the process of contemplation gradually takes over their lives, obscuring their understanding of their own needs and how these differ from those imposed by dominant ideology. (Debord 1994, p. 23) Contemporary viewers who look fleetingly at photographs of refugees on social media are seeing those images amongst a bombardment of their family and friends’ birthday and holiday photographs, along with advertising content, celebrity news and op-ed pieces, as when these images are accessed in the news media. This can result in the alienation of the viewer from the refugees depicted in the images. Consequently, any empathetic initial affective responses may swiftly dissipate. The viewer in the ‘society of the spectacle’ arguably accepts these images—which stem from, and perpetuate, the conditions that lead to an acceptance of the refugees’ lack of—as reified representations of the refugee experience. Both the photographs discussed in this paper indicate boundaries between the viewers and those being viewed; between those who speak for the refugee, and those who are still unheard; this

renders the ubiquity of the border seemingly unquestionable, yet again. The majority of the widely circulated photographs of the ‘crisis’ were taken by professional photojournalists, who were either assigned by Western media companies or whose fame is dependent on their mechanisms of dissemination. They constitute a ‘border’ between ‘them’ and ‘us’: ‘they’ are the photographed, subjected to being viewed. ‘We’ take up the privileged position of the producer of meaning /viewer.

This lack of refugee agency is quite remarkable in an age in which tablets and phones with in-built camera and video capability are increasingly accessible to people at even the lowest end of the economic spectrum. Refugees have used their devices to document their journeys to Europe; their photo-stories and alternative visual representations of border-crossings have had a limited distribution however and have rarely come to the attention of the general public. There have been many documented cases in which refugees’ mobile phones have been confiscated by border police, such as the case examined by Pezzani and Heller of the ‘left-to-die boat’ which had 72 migrants on board. The incident provided researchers with a case study of the EU’s failure to provide assistance to migrant people endangered in the Mediterranean. (Pezzani and Heller 2014) A military ship in the area failed to come to the assistance of the boat, and the ship’s crew took photographs of the people on board as they signalled their desperation for help. By that point, 63 of the passengers were already dead and those who survived were arrested on the Libyan coast and their mobiles were taken by the police, leaving researchers unable to collect and analyse any images of these events taken from the migrants’ perspectives (Pezzani and Heller 2014, p. 96). It is likely, in the cases of those refugees who reach Europe, that they replace lost or confiscated phones because these are a crucial means of communicating with families and friends both those

left behind in the country of origin, and those already resident in the desired destination. Most importantly, mobile devices allow migrant people to manage their finances via online banking apps, as they undertake what is (commonly, very expensive) travel. Despite the likelihood that most migrant people will have access to a mobile device, few refugees have been willing to share their photographs online, presumably for fear of coming to the attention of the authorities. In some cases, when refugees' photo stories have been shared online, these have been subsequently removed, presumably for the reasons outlined above. In some cases, however, refugees' photography has been made available on platforms hosting projects initiated by professional photographers.<sup>9</sup>

In the latter case, as in the cases discussed in this paper, photography tells us more about the outward-looking European gaze than the migratory experience itself. Following Azoulay, it can be argued that refugees may be (involuntary) members of the 'citizenry of photography,' but this citizenry does not equip them to negotiate their status as non-desirable non-citizens (Azoulay 2008). Azoulay has argued that a space potentially opens up when the spectator encounters a photograph; this act extends the 'photographed event'—that is, the encounter between the camera, the photographer and the photographed subject—potentially creating this new space. According to Azoulay, this new space shifts the focus from an 'ethics of seeing or viewing to the ethics of the spectator' and as a result, the space opens up possibilities of resistance in both the present, and in the future. (Azoulay 2008, p. 130). This imaginary 'citizenry of photography' has no location or

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<sup>9</sup> These are preliminary results from my unpublished research into refugees' everyday photographic production and photo-sharing on social media—particularly on Facebook and Instagram. While some pages run by migrants based in the Calais refugee camp in Northern France and in Lesvos, Greece were found, they were subsequently taken down, presumably due to the difficulties of maintaining these pages whilst in constant flux, or possibly, because of fear of identification by the authorities. Many of the pages are however still available and are coordinated by volunteers in these camps or by professional photographers. Indicatively, one can see the 'Refugee Info Bus' run by volunteers @RefugeeInfoBus and 'Welcome to our Jungle' @welcometoourjunglecalais run by photographers who have distributed cameras to refugees and collected the resulting images.

borders, not does it have any mechanisms of exclusion (Azoulay 2008, p. 131). The photographs studied in this paper, however, constitute borders in themselves—specifically, borders between the refugees as non-citizens and ‘us’ as citizens of ‘Fortress Europe,’ rendering the possibility of understanding the refugee experience from the position of the refugee nearly impossible.

Nonetheless, the perspective of ‘we’ should not be taken for granted in discussions about the viewing of ‘refugee crisis’ photography. Among ‘us’ there is a great number of people who may have helped migrant people in every possible way available to them, for example by hosting refugees, volunteering to assist in refugee camps, welcoming refugees at borders or train stations or by campaigning and protesting against xenophobic and racist policies. Such people’s experiences of the ‘refugee crisis’ are not limited to a screen- or page-mediated viewing,—they are also accessed through personal encounters, acts of solidarity, participation in community and support groups and other forms of refugee-supporting activism (though we should note that these acts do not necessarily derive from, nor are they necessarily associated with, the act of viewing). Secondly, the distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’ cannot be perceived as a defined and clear-cut distinction between those who are inside, and those who are outside the border. Mezzadra has effectively shown that such a distinction is less fixed in a globalised world, in which trans-national trade agreements and markets, including the market in migrant labour, dominate capitalist global economic activity and in which borders constantly shift and proliferate (Mezzadra 2015, p. 129).

The photographs discussed in this paper do not represent a rupture of the kind suggested by the representation of the ‘refugee crisis’ in much of the public discourse. On the contrary, these two

photographs are symptomatic of dominant and uncontested visual narratives of the ‘refugee crisis’, which represent refugees either as victims or as threatening subjects. On the one hand, stereotypes of refugees as miserable and helpless victims are perpetuated and the viewers’ responses are reduced to compassion and sympathy without any political agency. On the other hand, uncontested representations of refugees as threatening further render them scapegoats for xenophobic agendas in Europe, which contribute to the intensification and proliferation of security measures and the resurgence of populist-nationalist (‘alt-right’) and far-right political discourse. They are part and parcel of the uncontested constellation of images, texts and discursive formations that render refugees illegal, non-desirable and non-citizens, according to European immigration laws. Their spectacular status perpetuate the existing unequal relationships between the viewer and the people being photographed. The question then remains: how to contest the present regime of media and governmental representations, which may have formerly (and possibly briefly) represented refugees as ‘deserving’ of our empathy, support and compassion, and which increasingly now represents refugees as ‘threats’, ‘potential criminals’ or even, ‘potential terrorists’?. The use of refugees as scapegoats by populist-nationalist and far-right political agendas in Europe perpetuates a cycle of intensified security measures and xenophobic policies as a response to media-generated fear of the ‘Other’. Rejecting these spectacular images may be the first step in opening up current dialogue, with the aim of generating serious public debate about the ‘refugee crisis.’ This critical debate is urgently needed.

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