Special issue article

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Photojournalism as political encounter: western news photography in the 2015 migration ‘crisis’

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Abstract

In this article, we approach the news photojournalism of the 2015 European migration ‘crisis’[[1]](#endnote-1) as a political encounter between western publics and arriving migrants, where the latter are not simply ‘the represented’ but people who act within the photographic space. Inspired by Azoulay’s view of photography as ‘civic duty’, where “those represented continue to be present there at the time they are being watched in the photograph” and, in so doing, actively call for a response from their publics (2010:16), we ask the question of *who acts and how* as well as *what bonds of civic duty* such action puts forward for those publics. At the heart of these questions on agency lies a conception of arriving migrants as specifically *vulnerable* actors – people whose very precarity becomes a resource for meaningful action. Our visual analysis of news images across nine western countries, 84 images in total, in June-November 2015 demonstrates that their ‘front-page’ news imagery enables two types of political encounters with arriving migrants: ‘action *on* migrants’, where migrants are mainly acted upon within the procedural encounters of border institutions, and ‘action *by* migrants’, where migrants act upon and affect others within existential encounters that can potentially touch upon people’s emotional and activist sensibilities. While, in line with the canons of photography and migration studies, both types of political encounters restrict precarious agency within the binary positions of victimhood and threat, it is the latter, ‘**a**ction *by* migrants’ that has the potential to break with such binaries and cast vulnerability as resistance – as deliberate exposures of the body to the power of the border, which present migrants as *political* actors in activist practices of transnational solidarity (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, 2016).

Keywords: *Migration, crisis,**vulnerability, agency, encounter, photojournalism, news*

The semantic ambivalence of the migrant

The 2015 migration ‘crisis’ has not only been the greatest humanitarian emergency in Europe since the Second World War (UNHCR, 2018), but also a major journalistic event with continuous front-page coverage on national news platforms across the world, from June to November 2015 (Berry et al., 2015). From the ‘refugees welcome’ protests to rescue-hero narratives and from human tragedies on sea to reports on camps and reception centres, this unprecedented coverage of the migration ‘crisis’ in mainstream news contributed to shaping the continent’s collective imagination of arriving ‘others’. Photojournalism, in particular, has been a key genre of chronicling the ‘crisis’, capturing a wide range of contexts and circumstances through which migrants entered into various relationships with host populations (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017). Dominating the international photojournalism awards (World Press Photo, 2016), some of these depictions have been massively circulated, reproduced and debated – the Alan Kurdi imagery, for instance, or the crowded dinghy floating in the sea against a huge setting sun (Mortensen and Trenz, 2016).

In its intensive reporting of arriving others, such news imagery inevitably also raises questions about its own active role in staging the encounter between western publics and arriving migrants: who are the arrivants and what are they depicted to do? In public debate as much as in scholarly research, news photojournalism has been criticised for routinely portraying migrants as victims or threats and their hosts as aid-providers or security actors (Nikunen and Horsti, 2013; Benson and Wood, 2015; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Musarò and Parmiggiani, 2017). As a sufferer, the migrant is usually framed through aid interactions with her/his rescuers, while as a threat, the migrant appears in militarised representations of dark-skinned men entering the border (Little and Vaughan-Williams, 2017). In both cases, the migrant is predominantly anonymous, ahistorical, and speechless. It is through the recurrent use of specific symbolic tropes that this effacement of migrant agency takes place. These include *collectivisation*, the portrayal of masses of destitute people on boats or at the border (supported by the use of vocabulary such as ‘surge’, ‘tide’, ‘influx’, and ‘overflow’, as discussed by Abid et al. (2017)); *silencing*, the marginalisation of migrant voice in favour of elite voices (Georgiou 2018; Nikunen and Horsti, 2013); and *de-contextualisation*, the lack of insight into their histories, trajectories and emotions (Berry et al., 2015; for the three tropes, see Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017). Whether suffering or menacing, then, migrants are placed within, what Vaughan-Williams (2015) terms, a ‘zoopolitical’ imagination that undermines their humanity and deprives them of the capacity to meaningfully act upon their lives.

This co-existence of victimhood and threat in news photojournalism of the migration ‘crisis’ reflects and reproduces the broader geo-political framework wherein the ‘crisis’ has acquired its dominant political meaning – what critical migration and security studies refer to as ‘humanitarian securitisation’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017). Defined as a “search for the balance of humanitarian needs with concerns over sovereignty”[[2]](#endnote-2), humanitarian securitisation is traversed by an unstable combination of competing claims: to uphold the imperative to care for vulnerable others and, simultaneously, to protect European citizens from potential threats by those same others (Fassin, 2012). While critical migration studies acknowledge the function of humanitarian structures to address migrants’ emergency needs, they nonetheless point out that such structures are not antithetical but complementary to the regulative work of security – both its biopolitical work, in restricting and classifying migrant bodies in the ‘refugee camp’, and necropolitical work, in ignoring or even contributing to migrant deaths in the rescue operations of the Mediterranean (Williams, 2015). The term ‘humanitarian border’ (Walters, 2010) refers precisely to this concentration of aid provisions at the continent’s edges with a view to strengthening military control and protecting European sovereignty, by keeping migrants out of it.

What this brief excursion to the visual tropes and geo-political management of migrants demonstrates is that photojournalism may unwittingly be colluding to legitimising migrants’ exclusion from the relative safety of the European continent. This practice of, what Chouliaraki (2017) calls, ‘symbolic bordering’ is not a simple matter of ‘bias’ or complicity but, among others, relies on broader legacies in both photographic theory and migration studies[[3]](#endnote-3). Such legacies, we argue, themselves contribute to perpetuating static conceptions of the role of photography in public life as much as of migrant vulnerability as either helpless or malicious precariousness.

On the one hand, the canon of photographic theory systematically fixes the represented in a position of inaction or suspicion (Linfield, 2010), restricting not only the possibility of these people to appear as actors but also the symbolic capacity of viewing publics to engage with them. The photography of suffering, in Sontag’s popular argument for instance, either numbs our sensibilities (1977) or incites empathy (2002). As Hariman and Lucaites (2016: 8) put it, ‘photographs’ for Sontag, “either beautify and thereby ‘can bleach out a moral response’ or uglify and thereby can at most be provocative […] in any case, they ‘cannot dictate a course of action’ and instead ‘supply only an initial spark.’”

On the other hand, critical security studies are equally dominated by a determinist view of the migrant as voiceless victim, caught in the biopolitical power relations of the ‘detention camp’. Agamben’s (1997) seminal account of ‘the refugee’ as a paradigmatic subject of modernity’s impulse to dehumanise non-western ‘others’ rests precisely on the separation of ‘bare life’, the life of bodies in need of humanitarian aid, from *bios* or the political life of the citizen: “The refugees thus occupy a central place in our moral economy”, comments Fassin (2005: 367) on Agamben, “because they reveal the persistence of bare life in contemporary societies: deprived of their human rights by lack of citizenship, they can only claim to stay alive, most of the time confined in camps settled in countries near the one from which they have fled”.

Missing from these two legacies of the photojournalism of migration is a focus on the represented as vulnerable agents who, in the course of their journey, are capable not only of being affected but also of affecting themselves or others; capable, in other words, of making a difference, even if minimal, to their own and other people’s lives. The space of the photograph, we propose, is one where the meaning of what it is to be vulnerable can incorporate a modest view of agency, thereby opening up representational possibilities for the migrants to appear as neither victims nor threats but as irreducibly human others. Drawing on Butler’s minimal definition of agency, where, “under certain conditions, continuing to exist, to move and to breathe are forms of resistance” (2016: 26), we next approach the photojournalism of arriving migrants not as an empirical encounter captured by the camera but, crucially, as a political encounter that reveals something important about who western photojournalism imagines arriving others to be and about how it imagines our own response to their arrival.

Photojournalism as political encounter

The idea of photojournalism as political encounter with arriving migrants is inspired by Azoulay’s (2008) theory of photography as a civil contract, that is a political commitment that does not only index those whom photography represents, but simultaneously proposes what we, as media witnesses, should think, feel and do about them. What is useful about the idea of the encounter, for our purposes, is that it offers a versatile conception of photographic practice, where ‘the represented’, as Carville argues, “is reinscribed in the photographic field not merely as a visible presence but as an active participant within the relations of photography” (2010: 354). It is this insistence that the migrant in the photograph is not simply an image but importantly an ‘active participant’ calling out to us to take a stance which enables the focus on migrant agency, in our study. Even though Azoulay’s political-ontological approach encompasses a complex range of actions and connections involved in photography, she does acknowledge the centrality of the visual ‘mode of address’ in activating a sense of civic duty on the part of witnessing publics: “it is”, as Carville (2010: 357) says, “because of the active address toward the spectator by the represented that Azoulay identifies in photography a political space through which the recognition of citizenship can take place”.

This ‘active address’ of photography, we further argue, relies on a conception of the migrant as an agentive presence who appears to us by means of the *symbolic* resources of the image. The migrant, we thus suggest, needs to be seen as an active accomplishment of the visual meaning-making practices of photography, which is relatively independent from (albeit always grounded on) both the photographer and the news publics who witness the photographs (Kress and van Leeuwen 1995; Chouliaraki 2006). This productive work of the photograph to cast the migrant in various articulations of agency raises the key question of our analysis, namely who the migrant *affects* and how she is *affected by* others. It is precisely this capacity for action, minimal as it may be, that simultaneously introduces into the photographic encounter the idea of *civic duty* – the invitation for western news publics to respond to the migrant’s presence. News publics, as Azoulay (2008: 93-4) puts it, have a “civic duty toward the photographed persons” (16), which does not pre-exist the image but emerges precisely through our civic skills to navigate the space *between* “what was seen” and “what can actually be seen”. This tension between the seen and the seeable opens up the “very space of relations of photography” as a space of recognition – a space where the encounter between spectators and arriving others can potentially become moments of reflection and solidarity.

At the heart of this potential for recognition inherent in the photographic encounter lies the visual enactment of vulnerability. For, even though it is always a matter of embodied precarity, vulnerability should not be approached as a fixed pre-existing condition but as, importantly, also a performative practice that is iteratively performed through the meaning-making choices of photography. While, as we established, migrant vulnerability is caught up in the dominant tropes of risk, the migrant as ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’ (Aradau, 2004), it is worth exploring how such tropes may variously construe vulnerability in different photographic categories and whether there are visual tropes of vulnerability that go beyond risk. This latter possibility is historically evident in the trajectory of migrant lives, as they endured war or poverty, made an active decision to leave their countries and survived lethal land and sea routes to reach Europe. It is these modes of agency which emerge *through* and *because of* migrants’ vulnerability that Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) rethink as a form of resistance.

Even though these historical modes of agency are rarely ever recovered in the western photojournalism of migration, whose pursuit of newsworthiness focuses on the moment of arrival (Auslander, 2008), there is nonetheless a range of actions that can be represented, as migrants’ bodies continue their struggle for survival after their arrival on the European shores of Greece and Italy. These actions hardly resonate with the liberal ideals of individual autonomy and free will, yet, we insist, it is important to view them as distinct forms of “conditional agency”, where “the sufferer is able to be active even [if in] only a limited and ineffective way, hence the need for external intervention” (Chouliaraki 2008: 377). Eating, walking, or smiling in violent or precarious environments, such as militarised borders or camps, are, echoing Butler, meaningful acts of resilience, adaptation or indeed resistance.

Photography as civic duty, in summary, seeks to problematise the traditional binary of victimhood and threat in news photography of the migrant ‘crisis’ by paying attention to two dimensions of the performativity of photography. On the one hand, it pays attention to how migrants affect or are affected by those around them (vulnerability as agency), what we may call the *referential* dimension, and, on the other, it draws attention to the implicit norms by which western news publics are supposed to relate to them through distinct proposals of ‘civic duty’ – the *normative* dimension of the visual encounter. It is this latter dimension that attaches political significance to photography, in that, beyond its portrayal of a past moment, it also assumes that migrants continue to be present “at the time they are being watched in the photograph” and it is this presence that news publics are called to respond to as citizens (Azoulay 2010: 16). Our visual analysis of 84 front-page news images across ten European countries yields two main categories of agency, ‘actions *on* migrants’ and ‘actions *by* migrants’. While neither can fully escape Euro-centric legacies of the photographic encounter, we conclude that it is the latter, action *by* migrants, that can potentially make a difference and mobilise the civic duty of activist solidarity.

Modes of photographic encounter

The data of this study form part of the larger corpus of LSE’s *Migration and the Media* project, which consisted of 1,320 news stories and 84front-pageimages of the ‘crisis’ across ten countries around the world: Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, United States and United Kingdom. The sample encompasses ten nations from Europe and North America in order to capture a substantial part of the western visual space within which the migration ‘crisis’ was narrated, at its peak[[4]](#endnote-4). Given the homogenising function that western photojournalism agencies as profit-driven markets have on the global distribution of news images (Gynnild, 2017), we assume that, despite inevitable local appropriations of the photography of ‘crisis’, western news cultures share generalised patters of representation that define the orders of meaning within which migration makes sense to their publics (Ilan, 2018). The data were collected from both left- and right-leaning broadsheet newspapers and one mainstream broadcaster in each country to mitigate against ideological bias and were sampled from two to five outlets per country at three turning-point moments during the ‘crisis’: the peak of migrant arrivals, when EU leaders’ acknowledged the need for coordinated migration policies and agreed on migrant reception quotas per country (13 July 2015), the death of toddler Alan Kurdi, which dominated front-page news as a story of humanitarian failure across the world (3 September 2015), and the Paris terrorist attacks, which linked migrants with terrorism and shifted public mood from empathy to insecurity and suspicion (16 November 2015)[[5]](#endnote-5).

Even though the LSE migration news project was based on a comparative Content Analysis, mapping out the ideological, geographical and temporal differences across transnational ‘crisis’ news (Chouliaraki et al 2016; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017), our own approach is qualitative rather than quantitative – though it remains comparative. It is a thematic visual analysis of the 84 news images that traces common patterns across national online news platforms with a view to establishing regularities across them. The data were analysed on the basis of multiple, iterative close readings until the point of data saturation (Lazar, 2014) and categorised in line of our two conceptual dimensions: the *referential*, where images were scrutinised to establish forms of action associated with various performances of ‘vulnerability’: who is vulnerable and who is not, who acts on whom and how; and the *normative*, what course of action each image propose for its news publics. What follows is a typological classification of photographic encounters that emerged from our analytical process, detailing two modes of agency: action *on* and *by* migrants, each of which entailed two normative proposals of civic duty. Together, these photographic types, we claim, constitute the dominant symbolic space wherein political encounters between western news publics and arriving migrants took place during the 2015 migration ‘crisis’.

Action *on* migrants: Procedural encounters

‘Action *on* migrants’ is a class of photojournalistic imagery that represents migrants as subjects of various institutional *procedures*: standing in line for registration, offered food and blankets, or comforted by politicians and activists; or their injured or dead bodies being collected from the Mediterranean. Across these categories, whether welcomed, disciplined or rescued, migrants are acted upon and affected by European border actors with a view to being identified, categorised, encamped, and re-routed either towards Europe or back home. Within this type of procedural encounters, migrants do exercise conditional agency in that drinking water or hanging on ropes make all the difference in contexts of life and death, yet such agency is ultimately subordinate to visual proposals of military or paternalist duty that prioritise Europe’s territorial sovereignty over the value of human lives.

Military duty

This class of photographs consists of images of migrants standing behind or running towards European border fences guarded by army officers, on disembarking on train platforms contained by security personnel[[6]](#endnote-6) or in city streets escorted by armed police to different locations. A key feature of this encounter is the separation between migrants and their news publics through demarcating devices, such as fences, shields, medical masks or police line-ups, that encircle, contain, or direct their movement. Such imagery, we claim, performs a military form of civic duty not only because of the instances of physical violence involved – obstructing or pushing, but also because of the pervasive affective violence involved in the act of segregation – one that extends beyond the border itself and across all zones of military prohibition where the use of shields or masks define who is included in and who is excluded from western territories.

Even though the photojournalism of military duty can also highlight instances of effective action, where migrants escaping through securitised fences reveal the occasional permeability of territorial sovereignty (van Reekum, 2018), this class of photographs ultimately works as a space of symbolic bordering insofar as the proliferating imagery of ghettoised zones comes to naturalise the border violence of national defence. The photojournalism of military duty operates, in this respect, as a key securitising procedure within European journalism in that it illustrates, what Agamben (1995) after Schmitt, calls the border as a ‘state of exception’ – a space of national sovereignty where the state reserves the rule of law as a protective force for its own citizens, while it exercises the law only as a punitive force for those it wishes to keep out.

Humanitarian duty

Bodies-in need are the focus of the second class of news photographs in the category of procedural encounters. Here, migrants are seen are recipients of the benevolent services of EU state actors as well as NGOs and volunteer groups. These interactions are organised in two visual clusters. In the first, migrants are depicted *on land*, engaging with NGO practitioners and volunteers or with politicians and citizens. In the second cluster, they are portrayed *at sea*, receiving rescue aid from European naval forces and NGOs.

***Biopolitical duty*:** On land, migrants are largely seen as passive objects in the bureaucratic machine of humanitarian assistance. They appear as receiving emergency aid items such as clothing and food rations. A variation of this dominant theme, operating outside the field of emergency relief, portrays a tearful Palestinian refugee, Reem Sahwil, in a television studio among German youth, being consoled by a poised Chancellor Angela Merkel who had just informed her that her family’s asylum application would be rejected[[7]](#endnote-7). What this instance throws into relief is a broader feature of this photographic cluster, namely a paternalistic relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’, where the acts of giving, protecting, or hosting set up an unequal relationship between vulnerable but grateful recipients and their hosts’ charitable but merciless bureaucracy.

In laying bare the disciplinary nature of humanitarianism, photographs of anguished children like Reem can potentially make a difference; Reem, for instance, acquired the right to stay after the encounter became viral online and backlashed on Merkel[[8]](#endnote-8). Yet, the norm of the duty to care that informs such professionalised compassion systematically restricts the conditional agency of migrant others, most of who never enjoy Reem’s mediated visibility. For, at the heart of the humanitarian duty lies, as Barnett (1997) claims, a hierarchy of humanities that treats arriving migrants as objects of bureaucratic control and hence objectifies and dehumanises them. Even though, therefore, the humanitarian imperative treats migrants benevolently as suffering bodies-in-need that partake our ‘common humanity’, it is this same imperative that simultaneously silences and marginalises such bodies as unruly bodies-in need-of-containment. A ‘biopolitics of otherness’ consequently emerges through the humanitarian duty; a politics of ‘bare life’ that disciplines ‘non-European’ bodies in ways that either deprive them of access to the west’s ‘politically qualified life’ (Agamben, 1998), or only allows them such access, as Reem’s example shows, from a position of profound precarity and dependency.

***Necropolitical duty*:** In the sea, migrants are portrayed in dramatic rescue scenes, where, in the midst of open seas, naval officers lift children from dinghies to their vessels, while others cling on the vessels’ ropes waiting to be rescued; or where migrants’ dead bodies are collected from rocky beachfronts – the imagery of a Turkish security officer carrying the lifeless body of toddler Alan Kurdi being an iconic instance of this cluster[[9]](#endnote-9). By saving sea-faring migrants, the ‘sea’ cluster of images reproduces the same paternalist spirit between benevolent hosts and drowning victims, as before, while at the same time it brings into sharp visibility the risks involved in sea-crossings of the Mediterranean – 2,160 deaths so far in 2018[[10]](#endnote-10).

In exposing the tragic cost of migrants’ crossings, such imagery can potentially bear a significant emotional impact on western news publics; the Alan Kurdi images, for instance, were the most retweeted messages of 2015 yet, as Bozdag and Smets (2017: 4046) show, “despite their … potential to mobilize Twitter … the images did not cause a major shift in common discourses and representations”. Indeed, while the photojournalism of rescue is part of an increasingly aggressive and brand-driven ‘mediatised humanitarianism’ (Musarò, 2017), the cluster simultaneously conceals a more complex politics of in/visibility at play in European news. This is a politics that suppresses those instances of naval militarism which, instead of saving lives, demonstrate tactical indifference towards sea deaths, either by pushing dinghies-at-risk outside its legal jurisdiction within EU sea borders or by deterring NGO or civilian vessels from providing assistance (Basaran, 2015). It is this selective visibility of the ‘humanitarian battlefield’ (Musarò, 2017: 14), suspended as it is between duty-to-care and sanction-in-cases-of care, that we refer to as the necropolitical duty of the photographic encounter (Mbembe, 2003). And just as the necropolitics of rescue operates through the tactical indifference towards arriving others, so its mediation works through the selective portrayal of rescue operations as instances of western magnanimity while misrepresenting sea deaths as a-political misfortunes, “the result of forces of nature and unsafe practices” (Basaran, 2015: 215).

In summary, encounters that focus on ‘action *on* migrants’ consist of imagery that emphasise the migrants’ vulnerability as dependent or drowning others whose arrival calls for emergency aid or security measures. Both modes of vulnerability allow for subtle performances of conditional freedom, where personal distress or even loss of life may intensify public emotion and online awareness. Eventually, however, such instances are all subordinate to the power relations of the border, subjecting migrants to, what we call, procedural proposals of civic duty – humanitarian or military. These proposals undoubtedly reflect the broader framework of migrant reception in Europe, what we earlier discussed as humanitarian securitisation. Yet, our typology further suggests that such procedural encounters have a more complex constitution. They consist of a triplet of variations each of which captures a distinct aspect of the power relations of the border and hence a distinct sense of civic duty towards arriving migrants. Military duty encompasses images that seek to naturalise the physical violence of segregation and exclusion on arriving others, whereas biopolitical and necropolitical duty tend to either legitimise the classification of migrant bodies into included and excluded or to manipulate the governance of deaths by distinguishing migrants into salvageable and perishable lives.

Action *by* migrants: Existential encounters

‘Action *by* migrants’ is a class of photojournalistic imagery that represents migrants as actors in a range of ordinary and extraordinary practices: smiling, marching, or protesting. A key feature of this class of images is that migrants are largely on their own, so that the encounter entails no engagement with hosts. The only interaction occurs outside of the photographic frame between them and their news publics. Unlike procedural encounters, this class of photographs, we argue, makes claims to presence and to voice. In so doing, their vulnerability becomes the site of a different set of agency options, *affective* and *activist*, both of which break with the realm of ‘bare life’ – though it is only the latter that situates migrants into the political realm and mobilises the civic duty of solidarity for western publics.

Affective duty

Migrants, in groups or as individuals, are here captured in snapshots of everyday life on-the-move as they cross European borders on their way from Greece to Northern Europe. Images of them walking, sitting, eating on roadsides, or sleeping in open-air can be clustered in two dominant affective moods: the empathetic and the menacing.

***Duty to empathy***: Smiling children and exhausted parents carrying babies, families gathering outside a tent to eat dinner, or migrant families sleeping together in camps[[11]](#endnote-11) are all images that invite empathetic feelings. They inspire, in other words, the capacity for identification – a leap to the realisation that ‘this could have been us’, what Arendt calls the ‘imaginative mobility’ of the mind (Villa, 1999: 18). At the heart of this capacity lies photography’s ability to capture migrant lives, extraordinary as they are in their struggle for survival, precisely in their ‘ordinariness’ – as part of a mundane everyday where western publics recognise migrants’ humanity as their own, as ‘our’ common humanity. A clear example of this is the image of Abdullah Kurdi, Alan Kurdi’s father, after hearing of the tragic death of his family: his back to the camera, his hands covering his head[[12]](#endnote-12). This quietly anguished body language of a grieving father and husband does crucial affective work in establishing bonds of empathy with western witnesses without resorts to conventional markers of emotion such as facial expression or gaze.

It is this emotive space that construes the vulnerability of migrants as a profoundly existential condition, where bodily exposure to suffering and death emerges as itself a site of agency. Rather than being affected by others, it is now migrants who bear their affective impact on us by inviting a sense of empathetic duty. Despite the humanising force of this form of encounter, however, affective duty turns out to be radically unstable. Not only was the ‘ecstatic’ news-making moment of Alan’s death short-lived, as we noted earlier, but, following the Paris attacks, it suddenly turned into a news moment of insecurity and fear (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017). In a parallel move, the grief of Abdullah Kurdi was eventually put under scrutiny, when western media claimed that he may have been a human trafficker himself (Hasian and Muller, 2017). What this blurring of victimhood and threat in the figure of the father accomplishes is that it returns the migrant’s agency into the realm of security, demonising him at the very moment that it claims to feel for him: “[e]pisodes of compassion toward refugees […]”, as Fassin puts it, “appear as privileged moments of collective redemption eluding the common law of their repression” (2005: 375). Similarly to the procedural encounters of humanitarian duty, then, empathetic duty asserts ‘our’ humanity only to eventually subjugate it to a ‘biopolitics of otherness’ – one that relies on the affective ambivalence of their vulnerability as both humane *and* evil.

***Duty to suspicion*:** These are photographs of groups of men sitting or standing, and long lines of men walking along roads or crossing fields[[13]](#endnote-13). Like the previous cluster, this one, too, opens up an emotive space for connection yet, unlike the previous one, this is no longer a space of empathy but a space of fear. It is the representation of these young migrant men in terms of the visual strategies of collectivisation and depersonalisation, together with an intense focus on physical appearance, such as skin colour and age, that defines encounters of suspicion. By portraying migrants as a mass of anonymous dark young men walking along Europe’s motorways in endless lines, such encounters works to conjure up a threatening masculinity that invites fear: “immigrants”, as Dare says, “are always/already illegal/criminal, polluting and threatening… through their vast and unstoppable presence” (2018:12).

While, therefore, in the previous cluster, the extraordinariness of the migrants’ travelling trajectory was visualised in terms of its ordinary moments, casting news photography as an existential encounter of shared humanities, this cluster works in the reverse manner. In images of marching groups of young men, this extraordinariness is recast as radically alien, highlighting not *their* existential vulnerability, as before, but the *hosts’* in the face of their arrival. Instrumental to this othering of migrants is the visual process of racialisation that relies, on the one hand, on the physicality of the represented as ‘non European’ and hence as inherently ‘dangerous’ and, on the other, on photography’s capacity to capture a moment in time but not the historical flow wherein this moment is embedded; as a consequence, “black and brown bodies are abstracted from the context within which their behaviour occurs” and recontextualised within a crime-race nexus that *a priori* demonises them (Williams and Clarke, 2018: 234). Ahistorical and anonymous, young male migrants may be no less vulnerable than empathy-inspiring children or families, yet are endowed with a malevolent agency that traditionally dominates police discourses of migrant and ethnic minority groups in Europe (Owusu-Bempa, 2017). The duty to suspicion is, in this sense, yet another manifestation of symbolic bordering, echoing the procedural encounters of the militarised border we examined earlier. But whereas security was then enacted through migrants’ interaction with institutional actors, in the existential encounters of this cluster we see security enacted through a biopolitics of affect – a biopolitics that mobilises racialised bodies as radically evil in order to put them at the service of fear and suspicion.

Activist duty

This cluster consists of two groups of images: mid-range and close-up frames of migrants with sewn-together lips[[14]](#endnote-14) or roadblocks on motorways and train tracks with migrants holding posters of protest. Despite their different visual foci, both images seek to draw attention to the migrants’ cause: visibility and voice. The sewing of lips, a metaphor for the voicelessness of migrants, works both referentially, rendering them literally mute, and normatively, visualising the unbearable suffering of inaudibility in western public spaces that systematically represent them as mute. Such acts of purposeful self-injury construe migrant vulnerability as a public practice of witnessing that, in Pugliese’s words, “bears testimony to the failure of the nation to speak an ethical language of hospitality and responsibility” (Pugliese, 2002)[[15]](#endnote-15). Lip-sewing is, in this sense, itself an audacious speech act that denounces migrants’ subjection to a regime of border power that deprives them of their rights, including the right to speak, while exposing them to the retributive power of the law – Agamben’s ‘state of exception’. If individual faces perform resistance through the speech act of muteness, the bodies of protest in images of barricaded rail tracks perform resistance through the act of the assembly – bodies coming together to assert their presence and make themselves seen in public (Butler, 2016). If then the performativity of sewn lips uses muteness to reference voice, the performativity of the assembly uses the ‘in-between of bodies’ to reference visibility.

Two properties define this class of photographs. The first is that migrants’ performative exposure of injured bodies are political acts of resistance. Bodies are here both existentially precarious surfaces that place their physical integrity at stake and political forces of plurality that assemble in public so as to demand recognition – the right to be acknowledged as persons with a legal standing. The second, related, property is that activist photographs rely no longer on implicit visual norms to call up civic duty, as did procedural encounters of bare life or affective encounters of empathy and suspicion. Rather, civic duty is now an explicit invitation on the part of migrants themselves for publics to take a stance towards their arrival. This is because their action is no longer procedural (receiving goods) or self-referential (turning back to itself, such as eating or walking) but for the first time, it now performs Azoulay’s ‘active address’: it is a purposeful self-assertion aiming to yield political effects. In so being, activist encounters challenge the routine reduction of migrants to victimhood or threat, while carving the political space wherein broader affiliations of transnational solidarity can be forged. Their call was eventually politically efficacious in that it led to the ‘Refugees Welcome’ movement, a transnational network that stood in solidarity with migrants during the 2015-16 struggles over the closing borders in Greece, Hungary, and Serbia (Koca, 2016).

In summary, existential encounters that focus on ‘action *by* migrants’ highlight the latter’s vulnerability as an agentive force that produces effects on others, in the sense of both nurturing affective bonds and catalysing activist affiliations. Even if they highlight the existential condition of being a refugee, in its various manifestations, therefore, these photographic clusters cannot ultimately fully challenge the power relations of the border. Affective encounters, on the one hand, offer fleeting possibilities for empathetic identification with vulnerable others who are akin to the publics yet simultaneously reproduce the conventional binary of migrant representation between victimhood and threat. Activist encounters, on the other hand, mobilise transnational forces of border resistance, yet remain predominantly trapped in hardening nationalist policies that gravitate towards a de-humanising securitisation. At the moment of writing, national borders continue to be closed across Europe while humanitarian assistance is weakened if not fully withdrawn from Europe’s border camps; and border camps are, at the same time, described as ‘horrendous’ spaces where migrants are subjected to “the highest level of suffering.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Conclusion

In this paper, we took our starting point on the 2015 migration ‘crisis’, when European citizens came ‘face-to-face’ with one million new arriving migrants, and we posed the question of how this encounter was visually organised in the mainstream news contexts of ten western countries (eighty-four front-page photographs in total, sampled at three key moments of the crisis, July-November 2015). Our theoretical assumption has been that this encounter was not only an empirical fact but also, crucially, a political practice that situated the meeting between those who come and those who host within the existing geo-political and cultural power relations of global migration. Intending to go beyond conventional understandings of these relationships, where arriving migrants are routinely positioned in the binary of humanitarian securitisation as either victims and/or threats, we approached the photographic encounter as an active relationship, where both parties can potentially affect and be affected by the other.

To this end, our conceptual approach drew upon intellectual traditions that rethink both the social relations of technology (Azoulay, 2008) and the political conditions of precarity (Butler, 2016) in ways that allow for a new conceptualisation of the photojournalism of migration as a space of struggle for visibility and voice. Vulnerable migrants, we argued, precisely because of their precarity, continue to be social actors who can make a meaningful difference to their circumstances, whereas news publics are bound with an obligation to respond to them through photography’s normative calls to civic duty. These mutually responsive relationships, we emphasised, are not external to photography itself but inherent in the broader network of photographic relations, their political economy, distributive dynamics and, importantly for us, the visual meaning-making of the image itself. This meant that, for our purposes, migrants’ agency and the news’ proposals of civic duty had to be analysed as specific visual accomplishments of the photographic encounter itself.

Our thematic analysis yielded a range of visual variations that gravitated around two patterns of agency: action *on* migrants and action *by* migrants. The key insight from this dual pattern is that the vulnerability of migrants remains a source of action even under the most challenging circumstances. Whether waiting in line for registration, hanging on ropes, or walking down endless motorways, our point was that migrants exercise, what we have earlier referred to as, ‘conditional agency’ – manoeuvring within the tight constraints they find themselves in with a view to making a difference to their and other people’s circumstances. At the same time, however, we also sought to demonstrate how these agentive capacities of precarious bodies are always deeply entangled in the power relations of the border, thereby producing two distinct types of photographic encounter with arriving migrants: the *procedural* and the *existential*. In the remaining of this concluding section, we offer a set of reflections on this complex dynamic of power that traverses those paradigmatic encounters of news photojournalism. The trajectory from procedural to affective, we contend, is a continuum from subjection, or action *on* migrants, to increasing agentive capacity, or action *by* migrants, across these encounters.

*Procedural encounters*, let us recall, refer to imagery of action *on* migrants by security and humanitarian border actors. Photographs of armed forces blocking migrants’ passage through borders or restricting their movements in western public spaces, we argued, make visual proposals to military duty. While migrants do appear to act in efficacious ways in these contexts of life and death, from Reem Sahwil’s tears to migrants breaking through barbed wired fences, we showed how they are visually situated within an imagination of risk to western sovereignty and their management is thus cast as a procedural matter of national defence protocols. In a parallel move, imagery of United Nations workers handing out blankets or of national marine forces rescuing migrants at sea makes visual proposals to humanitarian duty. Our analysis demonstrated how, despite the heroic resilience that helped them make it to Europe, migrant arrivals are here located within an imagination of mass victimhood, where their reception becomes a procedural matter of addressing basic human needs or saving lives. In both cases, the power relations of the border articulate the need for security with an imperative to care and, in so doing, subordinate migrant agency to humanitarian securitisation. Images of camps or rescue boats, let us recall, gesture towards biopolitical and necropolitical practices that treat people-in-need as ‘bare life’ and classify them into those worthy of being treated as human and those who are not or those who deserves to be salvaged and those whose life is perishable.

*Existential encounters* refer to imagery of action *by* migrants, whereby they reflexively act upon themselves or interact with each other on their way to European destinations. Photographs of families eating dinner at roadsides or children playing in streets, we argued, are manifestations of conditional agency in that they perform a ‘universal’ ordinariness of everyday life ‘we’ can all identify as ‘ours’ and hence make visual proposals to empathetic duty. We showed how the vulnerability of migrants is here situated within an affective field of tender-heartedness and our encounter with them is thus cast as an existential matter of converging ‘humanities’ – we are all human beings. Imagery of strong young men making their way European motorways mobilise a different sense of conditional agency, where a radical potential for evil-doing stirs insecurity and makes visual proposals to a duty of suspicion. In both cases, the power relations of the border operate through a visual politics of affect that, suspended as it is between empathy and fear, appears to resonate with the hegemonic geo-political framework of humanitarian securitisation.

Nonetheless, we argue, existential encounters do differ from procedural ones in one crucial respect. The former are devoid of the presence of western actors and thus open up a different interactive dynamics within the premises of the encounter. In procedural ones, to begin with, migrants’ vulnerability is solely grasped as the object of western intervention and is hence fully elided as an agentive force[[17]](#endnote-17). Echoing Barnett’s (1997) critique of the bureaucratisation of humanitarianism that subordinates the intrinsic value of care to office routines, we argue that procedural encounters similarly portray protocols of action that reduce migrants’ precarious bodies to instrumental targets. In existential encounters, in contrast, the absence of western hosts removes the procedural frame and enables ‘the represented’ to appear as actors in their own terms. Whether their agency is ultimately de-historicised and de-politicised as a ‘universal’ humanity, in empathetic encounters, or radically estranged and regressively re-politicised, in encounters of suspicion, both affective engagements with migrants recognise their arrival as a profoundly existential event; an event that, at least momentarily, affects both them and news publics in utopian or dystopian visions of the continent.

This major difference granted, however, existential and procedural encounters ultimately do converge in a significant way. They both operate as sites of ‘symbolic bordering’ insofar as they visualise arriving others in binary classifications of precarity that prevent those others from appearing as political actors in western public spheres. This is because, as we noted earlier, the institutional legacies of photography continue to shape the visual language of migration in largely pre-political terms, where ordinariness or evil locks migrants outside the realm of political agency. To use Arendt’s illustrative vocabulary (1994), both procedural and existential encounters construe migrants’ agency as a matter of *labour* over material needs rather than as a matter of proper *action* over political claims in the common world of public affairs. Within this broad distinction, the difference between procedural encounters, where migrants are rescued and comforted, and existential ones, where they are eating, playing, or marching, is subordinated to the fact that both place them in a-historical and decontextualised vacuum where migrants emerge as ‘naked’ humans, as pre-political figures without voice and a story to tell.

Let us then finally reflect on the only mode of existential encounter that does push the continuum towards the conditional agency of politics. This is the *activist* moment, where sewn faces and protesting groups reconfigure migrants as participants of the western life of the polis, to echo Agamben. We have already established that such photographs perform the speech act of denunciation against the migrants’ status as ‘stateless others’ defined by muteness and mass anonymity. Perhaps we can now add that the agentive quality of these encounters lies precisely in mobilising migrants’ vulnerability as resistance: as the deliberate exposure of bodies, which turn their precarity into a site of struggle against the very border powers that injured them, in the first place. In so doing, migrant bodies disavow both the passivity of victimhood and the malevolence of threat that trap them in the binary order of photographic representation. Instead, they appear in public as unique individuals that make themselves seen and heard by all; as “the doers of deeds … and the speaker of words” to use another of Arendt’s evocative formulations (1994). Even though the conditionality of their political agency is painfully illustrated in the horrific accounts of border camps today, it is, we conclude, this daring act of embodied ‘individuation’ that renders the photography of activism the only profoundly political moment of our news typology and the *par excellence* existential encounter between photographer, spectator, and the represented in the photojournalism of the ‘crisis’.

\* Both authors have contributed equally to this publication.

Funding Statement

The authors received financial support for the research of this article from the *Migration and the Media* project at the London School of Economics.

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1. We place the term ‘crisis’ in quotation marks because we would like to both evoke and disavow the state of alert that the continent went through during the peak period of migrant arrivals, July-November 2015. We would like to evoke it as it has been the dominant vocabulary through which migration arrivals were framed and explained in the media, at the time. We would like to disavow it as we disagree with the Eurocentric uses of the term, which cast migrant arrivals as a crisis for the continent, calling for strict measures of border closures, encampments and deportations while ignoring the systemic causes that turned non-European zones of conflict and poverty themselves into sites of crisis and led the eventual increase of migration numbers, in Europe: httpps://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/02/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/ (accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Report of the European Council of Foreign Relations (22/12/2015): http://www.ecfr.eu (accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the crucial role of global photojournalistic agencies in the generation, marketing and dissemination of imagery of the migration ‘crisis’ see Gynnild (2017); Ilan (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The news outlets analysed are: Canada (*The Globe and Mail, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto Star*), France (*Le Monde, Le Figaro*), Germany (*Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Tagesschau*), Greece (*ANT 1 News, Kathimerini, EFSYN*), Hungary (*Népszabadság, Magyar Nemzet, M1*), Italy (*Correire della Sera, La Repubblica, TGCOM*), Sweden (*Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Sveriges Television*), United States (*Wall Street Journal, New York Times*), and United Kingdom (*The Independent, BBC, The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Telegraph*). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Images were sampled for three key dates-plus-two (i.e. two subsequent days after the breaking of the news, to capture sustained attention): 13 July, 3 September, and 16 November 2015, from 2 newspapers and 1 major broadcaster per country (save for United States where only newspapers were sampled). Even though the plus-two sampling strategy was not systematically used as our core material for analysis, it was useful in providing us with additional material to enhance or corroborate the sample from key dates. For each news source, one headline image and the accompanying story was sampled for each date, totalling between 7–9 images per country depending on the availability of images adhering to sampling criteria. Following the procedures of critical visual analysis, we employed an inductively produced analytical matrix, which included the following categories: compositional structure, denotative and connotative dimensions, and intertextual chains. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/migrants-fear-eu-doors-will-close-in-wake-of-attack-1.2432473 (*The Irish Times*, 16 November 2016; last accessed 1 March 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/16/angela-merkel-comforts-teenage-palestinian-asylum-seeker-germany (*The Guardian*, 16 July 2015). The incident between Reem and Angela Merkel occurred on July 15 2015, the week of EU’s decision to impose quotas on refugees’ entry to each European country; and the first turning-point moment of our data sample. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/refugee-crisis-friends-and-family-fill-in-gaps-behind-harrowing-images (*The Guardian*, 3 September 2015; accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Joseph Pugliese, ‘Penal Asylum: Refugees, Ethics, Hospitality’, *Borderlands e-journal*, 1(1), 2002, available at: www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1\_2002/pugliese.html (accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean (International Organisation for Migration, accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/03/world/europe/germany-migrant-crisis.html (*The* *New York Times* print edition, “Migrant Crisis Gives Germany Familiar Role in Another European Drama”, 3 September 2015, accessed 1 March 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. <http://en.kiosko.net/ca/2015-09-04/np/ca_toronto_star.html> (*Toronto Star* print edition, “They are all gone now”, 4 September 2015, last accessed 1 March 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 11 July, 2015, *The Globe and Mail* print edition, “Gateway to freedom: Migrants walk thousands of km for haven of Western Europe”, Mark McKinnon, accessed 1 July 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34903677 (*BBC News*, “Migrant crisis: 'Iranians' sew lips shut in border protest”, 23 November 2015, last accessed 1 March 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Joseph Pugliese, ‘Penal Asylum: Refugees, Ethics, Hospitality’, *Borderlands e-journal*, 1(1), 2002, available at: www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1\_2002/pugliese.html (accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/world/europe/greece-lesbos-moria-refugees.html (*The New York Times*, 2 October 2018; last accessed 10 December 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The awareness-raising impact of Reem Sahwil and Alan Kurdi relied, here, as much on the vulnerability of these figures, Reeem’s tears or Alan’s death, as on the global mass of news users who turned their lives into viral sensations, thereby highlighting the significance of, what Azoulay (2008) refers to as, the broader nexus of photographic relations between the photographer, the represented and the viewers, in which specific news imagery is embedded. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)