

Visualizing the experience of flight: photojournalistic portraits and refugee migration

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Abstract: This paper explores how photojournalism addresses refugee migration in Sweden, a country currently receiving a large influx of asylum seekers, in particular during a surge in global migration in 2015. Theoretically informed by literature calling for a compassionate visual storytelling focusing on the experience of refugees, the specific focus is on entries in the Swedish Picture of the Year contest. Images of children were particularly prominent among contest entries focusing on forced migration in the examined years, presenting an opportunity to further explore visual representation while also considering portraiture as a photojournalistic genre and visual strategy. A close reading drawing on semiotics and compositional analysis was conducted on images and written contest jury motivations. Findings showed a humanitarian aesthetic, formality as a storytelling tool, and an unresolved tension between showing and shielding young victims of trauma.

Keywords: Photojournalism; Portraiture; Refugees; Humanitarianism; Sweden.

Visualizando a experiência de fuga: retratos fotojornalísticos e migração de refugiados

Resumo: Este artigo explora como o fotojornalismo trata a migração de refugiados na Suécia, um país que atualmente recebe um grande afluxo de solicitantes de asilo, em particular durante um aumento na migração global em 2015. Teoricamente informado pela literatura demandando uma narrativa visual compassiva com foco na experiência de refugiados, o foco específico está nas inscrições no concurso de fotografia sueca do ano. Imagens de crianças foram particularmente proeminentes entre os participantes do concurso, enfatizando a migração forçada nos anos examinados, apresentando uma oportunidade para explorar ainda mais a representação visual, além de considerar o retrato como um gênero fotojornalístico e estratégia visual. Um desenho de leitura atenta sobre semiótica e análise composicional foi realizado em imagens e motivações do júri por escrito. Os resultados mostraram uma estética humanitária, formalidade como ferramenta de contar histórias e tensão não resolvida entre mostrar e proteger jovens vítimas de trauma.

Palavras-chave: Fotojornalismo; Retrato; Refugiados; Humanitarismo; Suécia.

Introduction

This paper explores visual strategies for covering a global migration surge, with a specific focus on images made by Swedish photojournalists while this Scandinavian country received a large number of asylum applications. Theoretically, the paper draws on a scholarly critique of visual representations of refugee migration, and on the work of scholars calling for a humanizing visual portrayal that allows for identification and engagement (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017; KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018; NAIR, 2018; WOLTERS, 2017). The empirical material consists of imagery recognized by the Swedish Picture of the Year contest. Migration is widely covered by Swedish photojournalists, reflected by a high number of entries on the topic in this professional contest. Images of children, in portraiture and other categories, were particularly recognized by the contest jury the examined years. Thus, this case study which has a descriptive and exploratory aim, focuses specifically on images of children, given the ethical dilemmas posed by visually portraying and circulating images of children in a vulnerable position (e.g. MORTENSEN; ALLAN; PETERS, 2017). At the same time, such images are of interest since the literature on humanitarian photography has demonstrated that images of children are useful tools for evoking empathy (FEHRENBACH; RODOGNO, 2016).

A qualitative interpretative analysis was applied to the empirical materials, in order to explore how children were visually portrayed and how this professional contest, as a normative body, chose and framed best-practice visualizations on the topic of migration. The Swedish Picture of the Year focuses on Swedish photojournalism. Yet the global recognition of some of the entries examined here indicates shared norms and practices within an international photojournalism community.

Theoretical perspectives on visualizations of migration

Research has identified an ambivalence in portrayals of “human mobility crises” (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017: 1164) expressed in tropes that may deprive refugees of their humanity (e.g. BLEIKER *et al.*, 2013). The literature points to two recurring visual frames or figures: victim and threat. These figures may contribute to shaping public perceptions and to reproducing a certain discourse through widely circulated imagery of migrants portrayed in a decontextualized state (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017). Certain visualizations may further marginalize and fail to evoke empathy or identification on the part of the public, in part by relying on clichéd figures and tropes (*ibid.*), and in part as a result of compassion fatigue (MOELLER, 1989) caused by a saturation of news coverage. According to this perspective, visualizations of crowded refugee camps may contribute to reducing those depicted to distant and passive bodies who lack “the legitimacy to articulate political will or rational argument” (HYNDMAN *apud* CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017: 1164).

Migration is also frequently visualized through close-up images and portraits, with the mother and child a prevalent figure, such as in Dorothea Lange’s famed “Migrant mother,” part of a U.S. Farm Security Administration project of the 1930s (ROSENBLUM, 2008). Portraiture such as these have been critically examined in the literature as exoticizing and objectifying sitters, in certain contexts, thus reproducing a world view of a distant and inferior other (LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993). Another common visual figure may be called the child in need (KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018; MORTENSEN; ALLAN; PETERS, 2017; ZARYCKA, 2016). This visual figure can be traced to NGO campaigns of the early 20th century, according to Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (2015, 2016). Such photographs are useful tools in humanitarian campaigns since they are,

“composed, edited, narrated and circulated with an eye toward creating a specific effect: to stimulate emotion, such as empathy or outrage, in viewers, and cause them to act” (id., 2016: 1125). Images of children, in particular, have proven effective since they evoke empathy and a universal humanitarian impulse to protect the innocent.

The rhetoric and visual language of humanitarian photography can be found in photojournalistic representations of forced migration, where they appeal to readers’ emotions and visualize news values such as conflict and impact (DENCİK; ALLAN, 2017). However, news organizations have been criticized for further exposing vulnerable children, such as in the publication of photographs of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 (e.g. MORTENSEN; ALLAN; PETERS, 2017; MORTENSEN; TRENZ, 2016; PROITZ, 2018). In the case of the Kurdi imagery, some news organizations sought to justify their decision to publish the images of the drowned boy, for instance through published deliberations stated to show transparency about the editorial process (MORTENSEN; ALLAN; PETERS, 2017).

However, the binary construction of two dominant frames¹ or figures might obscure a greater complexity in the news media’s visualizations of refugees (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017; KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018; LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993). For instance, Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic (2017: 1172) identified five categories of visibility in a comparative analysis of news photographs of refugees—biological life, empathy, threat, hospitality and self-reflexivity—each introducing specific “public dispositions” to act. Their study concluded that the visual figures were interchangeable and not fixed, such as when a welcoming attitude during the refugee “crisis” of 2015 in Europe turned into rejection following a number of terror attacks. While these authors found few examples of an expanded visibility, they fault society’s and the public’s failure to imagine an inclusive definition of citizenship for this shortcoming.

Alternative visual strategies and counter frames of refugee migration have also been identified in the literature. For instance, Parvati Nair (2018) found an aesthetic and visual language contrasting to news value in a photo reportage about migrants living in a no-man’s land, accomplished through a focus on mundane details in the daily life of undocumented migrants, aspects of life rarely seen in the news coverage. In turn, Joanna Kedra and Melodine Sommier, in a study of the global contest World Press Photo, identified rhetorical figures in the materials, including the figure of a caring migrant father challenging a prevalent visual figure of young male refugees portrayed as threats (KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018).

As a result, photojournalistic imagery is shaped by various factors, including the situation and the event (LINFIELD, 2010), the nature of the assignment and the image-maker’s approach, personal motivation, training and socialization into the profession (BOCK, 2008; YASCHUR, 2012), the conventions and norms of photojournalism (LANGTON, 2009) and, as discussed previously, prevalent cultural notions and discourses surrounding visual representations (LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993). Many photojournalists today work in a freelance economy, producing work for different clients and media outlets, including news organizations and NGOs (DENCİK; ALLAN, 2017). As a result, a photojournalist may have dual roles while on assignment. Furthermore, these circumstances may result in varied and overlapping visual strategies and aims, and are reflected in changing categories in professional contests that contribute to defining the field. For instance, World Press Photo, a global contest setting standards in the field, currently includes photography, video and film, Instagram portraits, and subjective and personal storytelling.

¹ See an in-depth review of visual framing scholarship, in FAHMY, S.; BOCK, M. A.; WANTA, W. *Visual communication theory and research: A mass communication perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Thus, the make-up of photo contests is indicative of both recurring and shifting practices in the profession. Furthermore, research has found that photojournalism contests construct a certain world view (GREENWOOD; SMITH, 2007) and ideology (ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS, 2000). Contests are normative institutions that set discourses concerning professional standards and recognize best-practice visualizations, making them of interest to research on visual media representations and the factors shaping them. Contests are also significant because of the wide circulation of award-winning images that as a result become publicly visible, contributing to shaping public perceptions (KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018). The Swedish Picture of the Year, chosen as an example for this case study, focuses on Swedish photojournalism. Yet the global recognition of some of the entries examined here indicates shared aesthetic norms and practices within an international photojournalism community.

Study design and method

The Swedish Picture of the Year, Sweden's leading professional contest, was founded in 1942. As previously noted, like other professional photography contests, it sets professional standards and recognizes best-practice visualizations. Research on photojournalism contests has shown that they help define and frame definitions of quality and professional ethics and that they produce and reproduce a professional ideology (ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS, 2000; GREENWOOD; SMITH, 2007; KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018). As a result, a jury of peers selecting what in their view are the most significant and best images can be said to set norms for how a topic, in this case migration, should be visualized.

The empirical material consists of nominated entries in contest categories where a child or children are the main or sole character. The selected imagery encompasses nine entries comprising of a total of 47 single images and one video. The entries were nominated in the following contest categories: picture of the year, portrait singles and portrait series, everyday life Sweden, and multimedia. The entries participated in the 2016 and 2017 contests, thus comprising of imagery made during 2015 and 2016 respectively.² The two years were selected to correspond with a peak in asylum applications in Sweden in 2015, when over 160,000 refugees arrived in the country, and its aftermath. The imagery selected for analysis was made by the following photographers: Magnus Wennman (picture of the year 2016, 1st place single portrait 2016, 1st place multimedia, 2016); Roger Turesson (2nd place everyday life Sweden, 2016); Malin Hoelstad (2nd place everyday life Sweden, 2017), Niclas Hammarström (3rd place portrait singles, 2017, special jury prize, 2017).

² A nominated entry is awarded either first, second or third place in the contest.

³ Captions are a required part of contest entries, according to contest guidelines at www.aretbild.se.

The captions submitted with the contest entries were included in the analysis³ since they provide context and guide the interpretation of photojournalistic images. Furthermore, captions have relevance in photo contests since they are a required part of the submission process and are read by the jury as they evaluate the entries. Thus, captions can be considered an external (outside the photograph) frame, following Roland Barthes (2009), imposing on it a particular reading. In the context of this case study, the captions were considered as an aspect of how the image-maker wanted viewers to interpret the images as they were meant to be read along with the imagery.

Also included in the analysis were written jury motivations published with the images on the contest site and in the book featuring the contest that is published annually.⁴ The statements were included in order to gauge the jury's justifications for recognizing specific images as well as their framing and interpretation of the images and their meanings. Furthermore, the statements were believed to offer

⁴ The images were viewed and analyzed on the contest web site www.aretbild.se, and in book form: *Arets Bild 2016*, and *Arets Bild 2017*.

insight into a professional discourse about photojournalism's role and responsibility in covering refugee migration.

A qualitative interpretative analysis was conducted on the materials with the aim of exploring how children were visually portrayed and how this professional contest, as a normative body, articulated and framed best-practice visualizations on the topic of migration. By emphasizing the analysis as a process of interpretation, the researcher acknowledges the subjective aspect of reading images. Furthermore, as Kedra and Sommier (2018) note in their aforementioned study of World Press Photo, an interpretation emphasizes a personal response to images, of interest given that images traverse the boundaries between private and public.

The analysis drew on tools from compositional analysis and semiotics. Specifically, the reading of the images was informed by communicative tools of photojournalism: the moment, the event, composition and aesthetics (LANGTON, 2009). Furthermore, the exploration of portraiture drew on methods for the interpretation of photographs such as the sitter's expression, posture, framing, atmosphere and composition (ROSE, 2016). Further aspects of analysis included eye contact and camera distance (BECKER, 2000; LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993). For instance, in visualizations of migration, eye contact and camera distance have relevance for how viewers encounter those depicted. As a result, distant imagery of masses in a refugee camp may be less likely to invite empathy or identification than a close-up portrait with eye-contact. Furthermore, various aspects of the look related to power were considered, drawing on a critical literature on the photographic portrait as an unequal relationship (LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993).

Findings

The following section presents the findings organized by themes identified in imagery, captions and jury motivations: *survival*, *in transit* and *host country*. The aim in this analysis and in the presentation of findings has been to highlight salient aspects of each position or theme corresponding to the physical journey—crisis, migration and arrival—and to discuss them in dialog with aspects of visualization identified in the literature.

Survival—a call to intervene

Photographs of children in distress are powerful tools in journalism as well as humanitarian photography. While some contest entries show children with healed scars or recovering from trauma, a contest entry shot in a hospital in Afghanistan shows children with fresh physical wounds (ARETS BILD, 2017). The images in this series are mostly half-figure or full-figure news portraits focusing on children in a hospital setting. The children are named in the captions that also explain that they are treated for wounds caused by shrapnel bombs. The short camera distance and foregrounding and centering of the wounds and anguished faces are recurring throughout the series. The images register and show the topic in a descriptive fashion; the content is the main focus. As a result, the images appear constructed to affect outrage (LINFIELD, 2010), and the foregrounding of wounded bodies suggests that the action required is humanitarian intervention.

The jury foregrounds ethical concerns in their motivation for awarding the series a special jury prize rather than an award in the international news story category. The light is described in the statement as “strong, pathological,” the vantage point “intrusive and confrontational.” The right to photograph and to look is framed by the jury as an obligation since the children have to live with the injuries. Thus, the jury poses a rhetorical question: Who can say after viewing the images,

“that it is meaningless to show images of war?” Thus, viewing implies a responsibility on the part of the viewer (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017).

Another series showing wounded children approaches the topic in a different way and appears to show them for different purposes. The series consists of formal black-and-white individual studio portraits of children and adolescents photographed in different countries, according to the captions (ARETS BILD, 2016). A color image from this series, portraying an apparently blind boy, was awarded top portrait while the series was recognized in the portrait category (ARETS BILD, 2016: 125). As a result of the child’s blindness, the photographer and the viewer are able to scrutinize the boy’s face without his knowledge, an awareness that again raises the ethical question about our right to look (LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993). In contrast to historic images of unnamed blind persons or poverty-stricken migrants, such as Dorothea Lange’s photograph of the unnamed migrant mother whose portrait became a universal symbol of motherhood, in this contest image the person portrayed is a named individual with a personal story.

The images in the series evoke a humanitarian theme of the innocence of childhood, enhanced by the poetic light and calm demeanor of the sitters. Throughout the series, the formal postures and calm gazes meeting the camera in some images suggest a collaboration between image-maker and child, an interpretation supported by the captions that are evidently the result of a conversation between image-maker, child and parents or other family members.

Aesthetic qualities are highlighted in jury statements for the studio portraits and for the single image from the series awarded portrait of the year. The portraits are framed in the statement as heartbreaking and respectful, references to traumatic experiences and to the way the photographer has portrayed the children, according to the jury.

While the images from the hospital in Afghanistan call viewers’ attention to trauma and an uncertain outcome of the hospitalization, the studio portraits do not appear to call for action with a similar urgency. Rather, viewers might reflect upon and engage with the sitters who have apparently survived an ordeal. Yet, the lack of immediate danger invites a certain openness and space to contemplate the images and learn about the children, who they are and what they have experienced, as retold by the photographer. Thus, while the named children are visualized as innocent victims of conflict or crisis in both series, in the latter the course of action is less clear, as is the environment and setting, since there is little visual reference to a current location.

In transit—stories through portraiture

While some of the aforementioned images present trauma or its impact explicitly, other contest entries refer to them indirectly, either under the surface or in the biographies recounting the past, or through a tension in an aesthetic visualization contrasting to stark realities (NAIR, 2018). This tension is visible in a series of night-time images of children at rest, asleep or awake photographed in various settings: forests, streets, hospital beds, home-like environments, according to the captions in locations ranging from the Middle East to Europe, including Sweden (ARETS BILD, 2016: 115-123). An image from this series was awarded Picture of the Year, the most significant news photograph of the year (ARETS BILD, 2016: 3). The series was awarded the top prize in the portrait series category.

The mood is painterly and serene in the visualization of apparently peaceful sleep evoking the innocence of childhood. One soft-focus shot shows a little girl

wrapped in a white sheet, reclining on a bed of green leaves in a forest (*ibid*). In other images, the setting is visibly unsuited and unsafe for a child's sleep, such as a sidewalk or underneath a bridge huddled with other youngsters. Furthermore, some children are apparently awake, suggesting an inability to rest and sleep. These incongruities were identified in the aforementioned study of the World Press Photo contest (KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018).

A child peacefully asleep is a universal image of childhood, an argument raised by the image-maker, in the intimate mood, in the construction of the images and in the sequencing of the series, as well as in the accompanying captions. Thus, according to humanitarian rhetoric, the child portrayed may be viewed as everyone's child (FEHRENBACH; RODOGNO, 2015). The jury's written motivation for this entry highlights its aesthetic qualities and innovative storytelling and a tension between normalcy and the abnormal disruption of childhood visualized in the images. The resilience of children and the perseverance of normalcy even in extreme circumstances are especially emphasized.

Yet another entry visualizes threat as latent rather than overt. A series of formal studio portraits place children and adolescents in dark settings where their faces are illuminated by a warm light (ARETS BILD, 2017). The sitters are former ISIS captives in Iraq, a piece of information relayed in the captions that creates a tension and contrast with the images' aesthetic harmony.

References to Rembrandt are part of the jury's framing of this portrait series, like other nominated entries lauded for its aesthetic qualities, here through a dramatic light illuminating the portrait subject. The jury refers to the images as expressive renderings by a highly skilled professional, thus emphasizing image quality and professional ideals.

While none of the images in the two series visualizes a clear threat, the risk or exposure is latent in both. In the images of children at rest, there are no adults within the frame. However, the captions provide the voices of the named children and in some cases their parents. Thus, viewed and presented in this context, each written story invites viewers to learn more about the children, their identities, their physical and emotional state, and their current situation and location—retold in third-person by the image-maker. Unusual for portraits, since they do not follow portrait conventions, the images are also unusual in their depiction of the so called refugee "crisis" of 2015 when many refugees, attempted to make their way, in many cases walking to and through countries of the European Union. In contrast, the sense of threat appears disquieting in the formal portraits where captions reveal atrocities committed against the depicted children and adolescents and, in some cases, their own forced participation in crimes and acts of violence. Thus, both series present visual encounters with children whose childhoods have been interrupted but whose countenance calls for an empathetic response, according to the interpretation based on this analysis.

Host country—everyday life

While the imagery discussed previously was made in unspecified settings or focused on refugees in transit throughout 2015 or 2016, the imagery considered in the following pages visualizes the experiences of children in Sweden, in the context of this analysis the host country for asylum seekers. Three entries were identified as featuring a child who has experienced flight and who resides in Sweden.⁵

⁵ While other contest entries focused on refugees in Sweden, they were not included in this analysis since they either did not depict children or children were not the main characters of the imagery.

An everyday scene of a young boy fishing with his father evokes the common visual symbol of father—and—son bonding (ARETS BILD, 2017: 56). While the pair might be any family in Sweden catching a fish in a lake, their identities as Syrian asylum seekers, explained in the caption, add another layer of interpretation. Thus, their joy-filled expressions and the scenic setting suggest normalcy and harmony. Furthermore, the portrayal of a nurturing father figure is a contrast to a more commonly negative portrayal of young male refugees found in the literature (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017). Examples of a similarly positive, non-threatening male figure were found in an aforementioned study of the World Press Photo contest (KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018).

The jury refers to this image as symbolic in two ways: as evocative of childhood memories, and as a symbol of this family's efforts and the hopeful possibility for the future.

In contrast to the aforementioned visualizations, which due to the portrait genre and the approach of the image-makers are formal and often posed and where the sitter has limited physical mobility, the boy fishing with his father is portrayed in a moment of seemingly un-posed action and interaction. A similar sense of agency was identified in a multimedia piece relating the story in first-person voice-over narration in Swedish—of a girl creating crayon drawings of her experience from the war in Syria (ARETS BILD, 2016: 156).⁶ While apparently a well-adjusted school girl fluent in Swedish—she is also shown in a classroom setting and at a bus stop waiting for the school bus—the girl makes drawings of bombs falling on homes while in voice-over she reminisces about being on a frightening sea voyage. A protagonist perspective is established in part through the girl's voice and visually through a low vantage point close to her perspective. The girl's story is the main focus since hers is the only voice and since she remains in visual focus throughout the piece. The story of her experience of war intersects with her current life in Sweden, the two strands of the story meeting in an open-ended final scene where remembers a friend in Syria who is missing.

The jury statement lauds the multimedia piece for its innovative, creative and simple storytelling. The core of the story, according to the jury, is a surprising narrative about a child's memory of conflict, a topic characterized as difficult to visualize and convey.

An emotional moment is captured in a photograph of a young girl surrounded by her classmates in a school corridor (ARETS BILD, 2017: 24-25). The girl is partially facing the camera and enveloped in a hug with one classmate as other girls look on. While she is the protagonist, another girl looking on from the center of the image is the emotional focus, as she is visibly crying, an expression mirroring the sad faces surrounding her. The moment visualizes the reaction to the news, explained in the caption, that the girl and her family have received a deportation order.

The image is part of a reportage about a family appealing a rejection of their asylum application, with the girl the main focus. The jury makes a reference to the reportage in their statement explaining its selection in the everyday life category, referring to the image as capturing empathy and "the decisive moment in a gripping story about children with different circumstances who share the same daily life."

All three entries show children engaged in some kind of activity and participating in everyday life in their new home country, Sweden. While the visualizations differ, the commonality is an integration into a settled environment. Thus, each visualization makes a claim about residency and belonging. Two of the children

⁶ The multimedia piece is available at this link: <https://vimeo.com/159034152>.

attend school, a sign of normalcy, adaptation and a harmonious childhood. The boy fishing with his father engages in leisure activities that, although in a Swedish setting, could be taking place anywhere. Thus, all images can be said to evoke the position of hospitality (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017) in different ways. The imagery frames the persons depicted as staking a rightful claim to in effect being “just like us.” Furthermore, while the notion of hospitality prescribes a welcoming position, some of the imagery discussed here casts doubt on the truly welcoming position of Sweden, the host country poised to deport a seemingly well-integrated family. Furthermore, the multimedia piece, while visualizing an ordinary school-age girl, interpreted in terms of the notion of hospitality suggests that physical and legal safety are not enough to heal traumatic experiences.

Conclusion and discussion

The contest jury’s choice of a portrait of a child as the most significant news photograph of the year—an image of a young girl asleep in a forest—frames the refugee story as the story of children and their experience. It also indicates how the jury believes the refugee story should be told. A similar focus on children has been found in international studies of the visualization of the refugee “crisis,” of 2015 when children, along with their parents made perilous journeys (CHOULIARAKI; STOLIC, 2017; KEDRA; SOMMER, 2018). In this respect, the child was a protagonist and frequently visualized symbol of migration during this time. Furthermore, this particular image has been recognized in international contests, including the World Press Photo (KEDRA; SOMMER, 2018), an indication of shared norms and ideals within the photojournalism community.

The Swedish Picture of the Year jury, in their written statements and selection of imagery of children experiencing flight, favored portraiture, and with some exceptions imagery that was not explicitly addressing trauma, and overall favored images evoking emotion. Jury statements discussed imagery in terms of a humanitarian rhetoric, that is work that evoke outrage or compassion, emotions that are effective tools in journalistic visualizations. Furthermore, subjectivity, and an image-maker’s respectful interaction with the person photographed or filmed, were emphasized. Yet the jury also lauded personal storytelling and favored more open-ended visualizations, common strategies in reportage and personal work. Overall, the jury framed its selections as humanizing portrayals and, in the context of migration to Sweden in 2015 and 2016, portrayed migrants in a positive light.

An unresolved tension and debate within the photojournalistic field emerged in some of the images, concerning whether and how to show trauma, or whether to shield those who have suffered it and who are in a vulnerable position (e.g. LINFIELD, 2010; MOELLER, 1989; SONTAG, 1977, 2003). The photographer whose works have been discussed here approached this in different ways. The contest jury discussed this ethical dilemma in their selection of the portraits made in the hospital in Afghanistan. However, the ethical question did not emerge in the jury statement of portrayals of healed bodies in another contest entry. In contrast, this visualization was considered respectful. While the aim of this study was not to determine whether or not certain imagery should have been made or shown or withheld, in the context of this contest, the jury deliberations and the varied visual treatment of children reveals a tension and contradiction concerning how children in a vulnerable position are visualized. It should be noted that the imagery discussed here did not cause the kind of controversy stirred by the photographs of the drowned body of Alan Kurdi, which also were published in 2015 (FEHRENBACH; RODOGNO, 2016; MORTENSEN; ALLAN; PETERS, 2017).

⁷ It should be noted that the imagery analyzed in this case study focused specifically on those featuring children, and that the contest included entries focusing on other aspects of migration.

A focus on children in news coverage of refugees, such as in the imagery discussed here, is part of a humanitarian discourse discussed in the literature. While children are innocent victims of crises and conflict, it can also be argued that a focus on the child in portraiture elides a more complex visualization of refugees, in particular since images of children often evoke an emotional response.⁷ Drawing on this critique, various images in the contest showed children as passive, a function of the portrait genre, in part, and in part in their situation as war victims, as well as how they were photographed.

However, it can be argued that the visualizations discussed here also encouraged an empathetic response, through portrayals and aspects of presentation, including captions, that individualized the person or persons. Previous research has identified counter frames and visual strategies for a humanizing visual portrayal (KEDRA; SOMMIER, 2018; NAIR, 2018; WOLTERS 2017). Contest entries discussed in this paper were found to draw on various such strategies, including focusing on moments outside the dramatic and the newsworthy, such as formal portraiture which calls for time spent and interaction with the sitter. Furthermore, a focus on daily life in some entries allowed for a portrayal of both non-dramatic and dramatic moments not commonly part of news coverage.

This analysis has not aimed to determine whether or not the imagery succeeded in promoting a civic engagement such as that advocated in the literature. Rather, the aim has been to illuminate questions, admittedly subjective, raised by a close reading of a series of images widely circulated and held up as ideal and best practice photojournalism in a specific context. A certain complexity found within the forms of news, portraiture and other visual forms suggest that research on photojournalism might focus more broadly on visualizations and strategies beyond the news photograph.

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