VISTA
REVISTA DE CULTURA VISUAL

No. 9 | 2022

Migration and Syrian Conflict: The Narrative Behind the Image

Migração e Conflito Sírio: A Narrativa por Trás da Imagem

Suzana Ramos Coutinho

Jesner Esequiel Santos

https://doi.org/10.21814/vista.3650

Vista
No. 9 (2022): January - June 2022

Migration and Syrian Conflict: The Narrative Behind the Image

Suzana Ramos Coutinho — Centro de Educação, Filosofia e Teologia, Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, São Paulo, Brazil/Centro de Humanidades, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil

Jesner Esequiel Santos — Centro de Educação, Filosofia e Teologia, Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, São Paulo, Brazil

This article aims to reflect on migratory flows and the political role of the image using the war in Syria as a reference. Hamza Al-Ajweh's photograph titled "A Syrian child walks down a street past the rubble of destroyed buildings in the rebel-controlled city of Douma in the Eastern Ghouta enclave outside Damascus", taken on March 8, 2018, and published for the first time at the *Los Angeles Times*, will be used as a point of reference for the discussion and analysis proposed here. The complexity of displacements in this specific context of war leads us to design Syrian mobility after the beginning of the war in 2011, understanding that this complexity goes far beyond the formal definitions used by international agencies. For a closer understanding of the debate, we designed the discussion in three parts: a brief contextualization of the conflict in Syria, which began with the Arab Spring and continues until today. This socio-political contextualization serves here as a backdrop for discussing not only generic migratory categories but to help better understand people, movements and the demand for new categories and visual reflections that go beyond current perspectives. And in the last part, we will discuss how the image of the photographer Hamza Al-Ajweh helps us think about multiple political and transformative aspects of the picture.

Keywords: migration, Syria, war, policy, photography

Migração e Conflito Sírio: A Narrativa por Trás da Imagem

Este artigo visa pensar os fluxos migratórios e o papel político da imagem utilizando como referência a guerra na Síria. A fotografia de Hamza Al-Ajweh intitulada “Uma criança síria caminha por uma rua passando por escombros de edifícios destruídos na cidade controlada pelos rebeldes de Douma no enclave Ghouta Oriental, nos arredores de Damasco”, tirada em 8 de março de 2018 e publicada pela primeira vez no *Los Angeles Times*, servirá como ponto de referência para a discussão e análise aqui proposta. A complexidade dos deslocamentos neste contexto específico de guerra nos encaminha para a necessidade de conceituação da mobilidade síria após o início da guerra em 2011, entendendo que esta complexidade vai muito além das definições formais utilizadas pelos órgãos internacionais. Para um entendimento mais preciso do debate, estruturamos a discussão em três partes, apresentando primeiramente uma breve contextualização sobre o conflito na Síria, que teve início com a Primavera Árabe e que prossegue até a atualidade. Esta contextualização sociopolítica serve aqui como pano de fundo para discutirmos não somente categorias migratórias genéricas, mas também para melhor auxiliar o entendimento sobre pessoas, movimentos e a demanda por novas categorias e reflexões visuais que ultrapassam as perspectivas já estabelecidas. No final, discutiremos como a fotografia do fotógrafo Hamza Al-Ajweh nos auxilia a pensarmos múltiplos aspectos políticos e transformadores da imagem.

Palavras-chave: migração, Síria, guerra, política, fotografia

Received: 30/10/2021 | Reviewed: 29/11/2021 | Accepted: 28/12/2021 | Published: 31/01/2022

Introduction

Displacement as a collective and individual phenomenon is a movement with different stages and perspectives that, depending on the thematic interests of the various disciplines that elect it as an object of study, includes, according to Santos et al. (2014), three possible approaches: (a) emigration (or the multiple social, political, economic, etc. conditions that motivate displacement), (b) social issues arising from a temporary or permanent establishment in another country, and (c) developments through obtaining new spaces (including in the political arena) aiming at the "integration into another society and/or establishment of cultural difference (ethnicity) and forms of collective belonging that can produce debates, antagonisms, and social inequalities" (p. 11).

Despite so many categorizations, it is necessary to point out that national States have invariably treated international migrations in a general way, without considering the specific and individual elements that caused them, harming many asylum seekers — who use the same mechanisms and routes of voluntary migrants, economic migrants, among other categories — in their access to the recognition of their rights. This reality has influenced debates on migratory flows both in academia and in protective and action-promoting bodies for refugees, points out Silva et al. (2017). Since the second half of the 20th century, the authors claim that studies on migration have highlighted the complexity of the topic's social issue and that its analysis and understanding could not come from a cognitive bias alone.

In such a troubled social context, images seem to be an analytical instrument/resource for understanding the proposed phenomenon. How may we understand the relationship between visibility and the political in the public discourse on migration? How can we visually represent people barred from their representation rights (political, religious, identity), and how can these visual representations obtain political visibility? According to Köhn (2016, p. 4), this public perception of the subject is deeply shaped by media representations. In this sense, images have become an integral and relevant part of regulating migration policies: images help produce the categories of "legality" and "illegality"; they reinforce stereotypes and mobilize political convictions.

In the context of this article, we will use the theoretical perspective of several authors to shed light on the debate proposed here, which aims to think about migratory flows and the political role of the image in this context using the war in Syria as a reference. Hamza Al-Ajweh's photograph titled "A Syrian child walks along a street past the rubble of destroyed buildings in the rebel-held town of Douma in the Eastern Ghouta enclave on the outskirts of Damascus", taken on March 8, 2018, and first published in the *Los Angeles Times* (Bulos, 2018), will serve as a point of reference for the discussion and analysis proposed herein. The complexity of displacements in this specific context of war leads us to conceptualize Syrian mobility after the outbreak of the war in 2011, understanding that this complexity goes far beyond the formal definitions used by international bodies. For a more accurate understanding of the debate, we divided the discussion into three parts. First, presenting a brief contextualization of the conflict in Syria, which began with the Arab Spring and continues to the present day (Ozkizilcik, 2021). Second, this sociopolitical contextualization serves as a background to discuss generic migratory categories to help better understand people, movements, and the demand for new categories and visual reflections beyond the already established perspectives. And at the end, we will discuss how the photography ofHamza Al-Ajweh helps us think about multiple political and transforming aspects of the image.

The Reader in the Battlefield

The sociopolitical phenomenon known as the Arab Spring cannot be defined through a single historical moment. Its complexity generates a constant variable in the analyses carried out on this movement. No single factor permeates the countries involved, in isolation, but rather a series of actions culminating in the various popular uprisings (Momani, 2014) and the largest urban conflict

ever seen. We have the example of what happened in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, all in Syria. However, focal points are commonly cited as the drivers of popular uprisings, which occurred after 2010 in Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan, and Syria (Ianchovichina & Devarajan, 2021 p. 2).

The first booster was registered in December 2010 in Tunisia, when a young man, who had a university degree, could not find a job because of the crisis experienced in his country, started selling fruit and vegetables from a stall. He was stopped by the local police, who requested the payment of a bribe so that he could proceed with his sales. The outcome of this clash was unexpected, as the young man Mohamed Bouazizi (1984–2011) set his body on fire as a form of protest, dying in hospital shortly afterwards from his injuries. This act generated a great uprising in the population, especially among the middle-class youth, who were in the same social condition as their new martyr (Momani, 2014).

These young alumni were responsible for the initial protests (Momani, 2014), creating discussion groups on social media and publishing their indignation. Soon, many of them would be on the streets, with a diverse agenda but a common goal: overthrow government leaders. Therefore, many call this act "a social media revolution", as we can see in the documentary produced by the Middle East Eye (Fayyad, 2021). The leaders of the involved countries used violence as a form of repression and containment; however, this act generated even more supporters of the protests, creating a "domino effect". In a short time, the population removed its leaders from power, and they had ruled for decades without power changing hands. For this, many used the same government tool, violence, resulting in rebel groups and more armed factions (Ianchovichina & Devarajan, 2021, p. 2).

Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power since 1987, fled to Saudi Arabia in just 10 days of protests. In power for more than 30 years, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned in just 18 days. In some countries, the protests took on a more warlike dimension, as in the case of Libya, which had Muammar Gaddafi in power since 1969; however, within mere 2 months, he was captured and killed. In the initial phase of the Arab Spring, the last president to be removed from power was Abdullah Saleh, president of Yemen, who suffered a serious attack in a mosque and was persecuted for months until he decided to resign, fearing further retaliation (Bowen, 2012).

In Syria, the development of the Arab Spring was different since not even the leader of that country believed that its population would join such a movement ("Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad", 2011). There was a propelling event, as for the others, when police forces under President Bashar al-Assad arrested a dozen children for anti-government graffiti in the mostly Sunni city of Dara. Several protests were motivated by the rapid success of the countries around Syria. Still, again, there was no unity in the requests of the population,

> true political freedoms, the release of political prisoners, an independent judiciary, the punishment of corrupt bigwigs, a free press, a new law on political parties allowing for genuine pluralism (and the cancellation of article 8 of the constitution which enshrines the Ba'ath Party as "the leader of state and society"). (Seale, 2011, para. 3)

Some more extremist groups called for Assad's surrender and death.

In March 2011, under the president's command, the military forces opened fire at random against the population participating in the protests, killing several not eminently dangerous individuals (Slackman, 2011). This act generated a greater revolt, and soldiers abandoned their posts and joined the newly formed Free Syrian Army (FSA), an opposition group against the current government, formed by many people with no military training, using improvised weapons and following the most diverse lines of interpretation about the Quran (Slim, 2012). At that moment, the

Arab Spring in Syria took an uncontrollable course, and the eminent chaos reached all social spheres in that country, especially in the lives of those who did not want to fight for the FSA or who were part of ethnic and religious minorities (Momani, 2014).

Religion is a game-changer (or weapon) in the Syrian civil war since most FSA fighters are Sunni (Slim, 2012), while the army is predominantly Alawite (Araújo, 2012). In addition, there are several minority religious groups such as Christians, Druze, and Ismailis. There are also ethnic groups with a lower concentration than the rest of the population, such as the Kurds. This division occurred due to the way the country was colonized by the French (1920–1946) and the geographic and religious structure, for fear of a revolt by Muslim nationalists, who had a Sunni majority, made France seek minority leaders to join public offices and the military forces (Fildis, 2012, p. 151).

Economic factors caused many Alawites, who resided in rural areas, to see the army as a way of survival, while Sunnis had an aversion to it, as they did not want to be associated with the French, saying that these positions were intended for lazy people and/or rebels, as Patrick Seale (1989) reports in his book *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*:

> this was the historic mistake of the leading families and of the mercantile and landowning class to which they belonged: scorning the army as a profession, they allowed it to be captured by their class enemies who then went on to capture the state itself. (p. 39)

The Alawites held the leading positions in the government and army, possessing military and legislative power. Meanwhile, most of the population, which was Sunni, did not have the same army power, being at the mercy of authoritarian governments or terrorist groups (Kaplan, 1993). Therefore, religion separates groups politically and geographically in Syria, causing areas to be protected by the government. In contrast, others need militias to maintain order, as in the case of Christians, who support the government of Bashar al-Assad due to the protection it provides (CNN, 2013). Still, with the growth of the FSA, they have been forced to flee or buy weapons to protect themselves.

The civil war made the ethnic and religious difference even more pronounced, as no Alawite would stand against the government that protected them, even if they disagreed with the way of ruling the country. There is yet another group that seeks to dominate the territory in Syria, taking advantage of the chaos, known as Daesh or Islamic State, formed by remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, of Sunni origin, but fighting against FSA rebels, who are also Sunnis, but do not follow the Salafist line of interpretation (Wood, 2016/2017, p. 80). They also fight the Alawite government of Assad and impose sharia[1] and commit atrocities over minority groups, bringing yet another element of instability to the population, which is in the line of action of several groups (Momani, 2014). Therefore, danger, poverty, and the high risk of death surround the inhabitants of Syria daily, on all sides, making the most viable alternative to move to countries already appeased. Many flee to countries that border or are close to Syria. Others seek a completely different life in countries outside the Middle East. Confinement in refugee camps throughout the country is also a reality. It generated a certain aversion in the population due to the lack of resources and the impossibility of ascension that could lift many out of poverty (Valent et al., 2020, p. 158).

According to the *2021 Needs and Response Summary* (Syrian Arab Republic's, 2021), published in February 2021, there are around 13,400,000 migrants/refugees in need of some form of humanitarian support coming from the Syrian cities. That number encompasses more than 55% of Syria's pre-war population. Official estimates indicate that 6,700,000 are international migrants/refugees, while 6,360,000 are internally displaced persons still residing in Syria, and 320,000 people have recently returned to the country. In addition, several factors make it difficult to categorize these people.

> We can, among other categories, distinguish between Syrian refugees, asylum seekers,

> forced migrants, transit migrants, stranded migrants, unaccompanied minors, irregular migrants, mixed migrants, naturalised migrants, labour migrants, entrepreneurs, investors, and students. Moreover, this list is only partial, and many of the categories are not mutually exclusive. And neither are the categories static. (Valenta et al., 2020, p. 157)

As much as some media channels have defended the victory of Bashar al-Assad (Glass, 2017) since 2018, after the conquest of Dara, Syria is far from a peaceful country (Ozkizilcik, 2021). As we pointed out earlier, Syria is a complex country, as its population does not have a single ethnicity or religion; therefore, for a person to return to their hometown, it would be necessary for that area to be dominated by the group they support or to which they belong.

However, internal displacement was only an initial step in the migration process; for many, the process evolved into emigration from the country. These emigrations generated several different categories of migrants — formal and informal. Valenta et al. (2020, p. 157) suggest that it is possible to distinguish between Syrian refugees, asylum seekers, forced migrants, migrants in transit, imprisoned migrants, unaccompanied minors, irregular migrants, mixed migrants, naturalized migrants, migrant workers, entrepreneurs, investors, and students. Furthermore, as the authors state, this list is only partial, and many of the categories are neither mutually exclusive nor static. Another aspect worth mentioning concerns the multiple categories assigned to refugees in host countries. The type of accommodation provided to them, the trajectory during the migratory process, the formal status and type of residence, the social rights they access and their socioeconomic position in the hosting society are examples of categorization — which here, it is worth saying, matter to us, as they can help to stimulate new migrant statuses relevant to post-war Syrian migration patterns.

We close this session by emphasizing that these migration flow and statuses are by no means static; they change in the interaction between the elements of the system described above and "the individual responses of Syrians to life circumstances, as defined by the structures and regimes outlined" (Valenta et al., 2020, p. 161).

Migration and Image: Theoretical and Political Perspectives

Contemporary migrations are largely produced and shaped by the demands of globalized capitalism that is ambiguous and contradictory. This complexity has revealed that the analyses and descriptions of human mobility have been insufficient. The war in Syria, for example, already points out that the proposed migratory categories have been proven inadequate. Some authors — Jameson (1992) and Köhn (2016), among others — have pointed out that we can no longer guide the debate based on categories that explain the mobility of individuals based on individual orientations. "As the mechanisms and dynamics of global capitalism are not visible, they present themselves as a fundamental problem of representation" (Jameson, 1992, p. 2). We share Jameson's (1992) perspective on the problem of representation, and we go further: it is necessary to decolonize the debate and, in our viewpoint, to understand that the great western narratives about migratory processes need to be rethought in the face of an increasingly complex world.

In the context of this article, the image is not thought of as a "vehicle" that gives publicity and refers to the immigrant and their lived experience, highlighting or revealing the phenomenon. The proposal here is to think about the migratory phenomenon with the help of images in their light. The idea is to unite visual practice with theoretical reflection. As we experience the world through visual representations and rhetoric, the act of seeing and making visible takes on tremendous theoretical and political relevance (Köhn, 2016, p. 4). Visual rhetoric, in this context, is focused on understanding the way images communicate, how they function in a social and cultural environment, and how they embody meaning. In the media context, images are seen primarily as

information vehicles about important world events. Still, the media's structure and the reader's expectations often complicate the issue. It is necessary to consider the images conveyed in the media as part of an intricate network belonging to a cultural phenomenon. Rhetoric is usually regarded as a key of persuasion, classically used to convince us of a point of view (in the modern era, widely used for convincing us to purchase). However, we can consider that rhetoric also plays an important role in forming community identity and in the ability to reinforce beliefs and stereotypes (Wright, 2016, p. 318).

The image here presents itself as an object of reflection on the responsibility of deconstructing these stereotypes, seeking new and transforming forms of visibility that do not merely reproduce the visual discourse of the government or the mass media, but "challenge the established political order by revealing the purposefully and deliberately hidden, articulating what has not yet been said and suggesting viable alternatives to the status quo" (Köhn, 2016, p. 4). However, the researchers' representations of migration still come up against the distorted discourse produced by the media. Large media corporations often make an ideological and distorted image of migration that influences political debates. The challenge for researchers is not only to implement a non-hierarchical mode of production of knowledge that approaches the subjective experiences of these migrants but also "to produce a deliberate discourse that meets the reality experienced by migrants" (Köhn, 2016, p. 8).

It is important to highlight that social scientists have only recently started to expand the circulation of media representations of migration. Alan Grossman and Aine O'Brien (2007, p. 6) were the authors who first provided a more general view of this field, extolling the practice of the media as a facilitator of a deeper understanding of the lived, contradictory and often ephemeral conditions that form the life of migrant subjects. In this sense, the purpose of this discussion is to problematize photography as a resource of understanding to bring us closer to the migrant experience and how these images and texts can communicate, even partially, elements of this tangle of perceptions in global-scale processes.

It becomes increasingly important to analyze the capacity of images and texts to create new discourses and the need to examine the social and institutional context restricted to their function. The power of the media has indeed received little attention in research on the representation of migration (Wright, 2002). We take as an example the reflection proposed by Malkki (1995), who pointed out that "photographic portraits of refugees are, in our days, extremely abundant. Most readers have probably seen these photos, and most of us have a strong visual sense of what 'a refugee looks like'" (p. 9). The visual and textual representation of migrants plays an essential but neglected role in forming the stereotype of these groups.

In general, there is a tendency to disregard the political impact that our representations can generate in the social sciences and humanities. Arjun Appadurai (1988) claimed that we should not reduce our works to mere descriptions of the present; we should imagine possibilities and possible futures rather than submit to the impositions of external changes.

Burgin (1982, as cited in Langmann & Pick, 2018) claims that photographs captivate, and it has become almost impossible for there to be a day in our lives in which we do not see a photograph. Contemporary society has witnessed an explosion of the visual through photographs. The immediate, multi-sensory impact of photographs (Spencer, 2011) has been recognized and elevated to a position of power to access cognitive memory and communicate seemingly complex messages with visual simplicity (Bell & Davison, 2013). Photography constitutes an element and a form in visual and image research, which are umbrella terms that refer to connected research practices linked to the visual appearance of the surrounding world (Warren, 2005).

The experience of the conflicts of our time, whether around questions of autonomy, sovereignty, or nationality, is primarily shaped by visual representations. Much of contemporary politics is therefore driven through visual culture. Recognizing how images become autonomous participants

in the construction of social meaning, we use the discussion proposed by Roland Bleiker (2012), who defends a more aesthetic form of political thought. The author suggests an aesthetic engagement with the political world based on the understanding that aesthetic sources offer valuable insights that other scientific investigation methods cannot explain.

We share the perspective of Ariella Azoulay (2008), who proposes a political ontology of visual representation that promotes the understanding of images as active agents in social relations. By guiding her work from photographs of Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel, Azoulay describes how images can offer a space of citizenship for those who do not belong to or do not receive protection from the sovereign power. The author sees a "civil contract" inscribed in the photograph, in which the photographer, the photographed, and the observer of the photograph participate. As no photographer can claim ownership of what appears in the photograph or determine its unique meaning, people photographed can use their image to claim rights denied by the state. Spectators are treated by photography as "universal spectators" who are linked in a kind of civic duty with the photographed subject and, therefore, are invited to take responsibility for "witnessing the unbearable" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 18). Thus, the visual representation can offer those excluded from political representation a first chance to articulate how they have been dominated. For the author (Azoulay, 2012), the individual becomes a citizen through photography — not just by being photographed, but by being visible in a world where visual media gives public recognition to potentially everyone, where (given the ubiquity of cameras as tools for the masses) photography is always a "potential event" (p. 22). Thus, photography allows its citizens to appear in public, present themselves before it, and dialogue with the public through images.

However, for Azoulay (2012), documentary images can never be "very aesthetic" because they always document the relationships and negotiations between the photographer and the subjects. They always portray the political context in which they were created. In the author's perception, photography is always the product of an encounter between citizens: her analyses of images from the history of photography explore in detail how those photographed have continually used the "event of photography" to contest injustices publicly. Azoulay (2012) thus dismantles the binary between the political space (which, for her, is inherent to every encounter between human beings) and the space of aesthetics, unifying both.

The Narrative Behind the Image: The Case of the Photo by Hamza Al-Ajweh

Once we have briefly contextualized the sociopolitical scene of the war in Syria and presented some possible analytical tools for a better understanding of the political power of the image, we would now like to analyze the visual discourse around migratory themes and the policies of (in)visibility inscribed on it. We will use the image of Hamza Al-Ajweh, first published in 2018 in the *Los Angeles Times* and published countless times on websites and news newspapers. This image will serve us here as a methodological resource to think about the role of the image as an active element of transformation and visibility.

It is important to note that this image was not chosen randomly in the context of this article. Rather, it considered its impact on official journalistic channels, both in Western and Middle Eastern contexts. We also highlight the photographer's place, Hamza Al-Ajweh, in the context under discussion. Born in Damascus, one of the cities most affected by the conflict, the photographer is now a Syrian refugee living in Istanbul, Turkey, with the highest number of Syrian refugees. Contrary to the dictator Bashar al-Assad, Al-Ajweh is an activist and has acted militant through photography, denouncing the horrors of war in photographs published on his social networks.

In the last 2 decades, we have witnessed a growing acceleration of people's migration and the circulation of images. For Wright (2002, p. 53), the power and meaning of images and visual

representations have become an urgent matter of academic concern. These approaches offered a critical iconology of the visual stereotypes and clichés in which migration is often portrayed. They also reveal the assumptions that these representations imply and explore the practices of social exclusion inscribed in them.

Most studies that engage analytically with the visual representation of migrants in mass media criticize the use of distortions and clichés. For example, Terence Wright (2002) analyzes several press photos depicting migrants and points out that many of these images refer to Christian iconography to build the helpless and victimized refugee image. Francesca Falk (2010) explores the theme of the (overcrowded) boat as a visual and verbal metaphor in the discourse on refugees and asylum. The author shows how it is often associated with invasion in anti-migration political campaigns. These and other works, such as Kafehsy (2010), reveal how migrants are criminalized or described as passive victims without agency. Thus, they aim to discover the ideological "unconscious" prejudices of mass media representations.

Teun van Dijk (1999) has explored the field of studies on racism and the media, emphasizing the representations of ethnic minorities made up of immigrants in print media in several countries. The author has highlighted the systematic silence or undervaluation of everyday life experiences, non-stereotyped roles, and the successes and contributions of these minorities in the field of arts, politics, and economics, in favor of negative images and a perspective of criminalization of women migratory experiences as specificities of the media's agenda in the context of the societies studied. "Named as illegal, clandestine, irregular, refugees, deportees, immigrants are targets of a negative and 'police' semantic that includes intolerance, violence, unemployment, isolation, prejudice, poverty, condemnation, supervision, deportation, expulsion, trafficking or detention" (Cogo, 2001, p. 17). The titles of some of the articles mapped suggest the emphasis on a "criminalization" in which immigrants appear; even though they occupy the position of the subject they appear, in most cases, as "patients" or "objects" of the actions of "others", usually the authorities or the police force.

The understanding of the construction of a media agenda on migratory experience begins to be constructed from an initial empirical approach to what Cogo (2001) calls "offers of meaning" (p. 15). The print media is, according to her, a privileged sphere for offering "meanings" to authorities, specialists, and other social actors responsible for formulating policies and decision-making in different social fields. However, for van Dijk (1999), the power of the media should not be understood in terms of simplistic "effects". Although he does not reflect on reception, the author argues that socioeconomic and sociocultural differences interfere in the way people interpret, represent, and evaluate journalistic materials and news events and, consequently, form different opinions, attitudes, and ideologies. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that the media are extensions of society's struggles and symbolic sharing. As Maigret recalls (2003/2010), "the media are spaces where the formation, reproduction, and contestation of a set of practices and beliefs act, mixing power and culture inextricably, and each of these elements is read in the other" (p. 309).

In this critical process of (de)constructing stereotypes around the image and thinking of images as an active element in social relations, the visualization process becomes a dynamic interaction between the photographer, the spectator, and the image; meaning is actively constructed, not passively received. Barthes (1982/1990) characterizes photographs as "polysemic", capable of generating multiple meanings in the visualization process. In many ways, Hamza Al-Ajweh's photography points to this polysemic character, revealing multiple layers of analysis and interpretation.

Efforts to understand what a photograph represents from different perspectives have not yet produced clear conclusions (Soszynski, 2006). The representation attribute of a photograph covers a variety of concepts. Scruton (1981, as cited in Langmann & Pick, 2018) argues that "a photograph can represent a relationship: x (the photograph) represents y (the subject). However, a simple causal relationship cannot explain the complete representation of a photograph, as it is absent from

thought, intention, or other mental acts" (p. 580). Rather, a photograph represents a site of complex intertextuality with a series of overlapping texts becoming object texts with social intent and meaning (Burgin, 1982). This relational intertextuality of a photograph is defined by Brummitt (1973) as representing communication. Gerhard Richter (as cited in Coulter, 2013) asserts that a photograph represents nothing and introduces the need for an observer's interpretation for the photograph to reach a representative status. For Richter (as cited in Coulter, 2013), photographs are not a medium that carries reality but challenges reality. He argues that photographic representation is closer to an enigma that needs to be deciphered than to clarity and ideology.

Why do only certain events and photographs catch people's attention? Marks (2008) conceptualizes images as vehicles that engage the past through experience and hypothesizes a triadic relationship between image, experience, and information, whereby we, as spectators, selectively unfold their meaning and perceive their usefulness. Images are a selective unfolding of experience and are determined by information. The experience involves them, but they are also unfolded by the experience, translated into information that becomes useful for the viewer (Marks, 2008). The selection and unfolding of images occur according to the spectator's interest in the question, determining which images are worthy of circulation. Dados (2010) argues that images are not only unfolded by experience but are also selected and unselected based on information, making the experiences embedded in the image accessible or inaccessible.

In this sense, Hamza Al-Ajweh's photography reminds us that we need to go beyond the image itself and explore its conceptual complexity, its insights, and its many interpretations, which help us understand what photographs in a social research context represent and why they are an important component for and in social research. An element that is often overlooked concerns the difficulty of understanding the narrative when we do not know the story and context of the image — especially in complex scenarios such as the war in Syria. Al-Ajweh's photo indicates an image produced in the context of war, pointing out the suffering and possible loneliness/abandonment/wandering of a child who walks among the rubble of a city devastated by a severe bombing. By indicating in the photo a child walking alone among the rubble, it is understood that the child is living (and surviving) in the affected region, which provides a great deal of depth to the scene. The context of destruction that frames the photograph reveals the intensity of the bombing and the deadly potential of this event: the cars crushed among the rubble and the destroyed and unrecognizable facades symbolically point to an absolute erasure of everyday records and memories. The man on his back, who walks in the opposite direction to the child, indicates dispersion and loneliness. The predominant shades of grey depict the concrete dust suspended in the air and show the coldness of the scene portrayed.

However, it is necessary to consider the polysemic aspects of the image and go further, considering the image as an active element in social relations. In 2018, many cities were retaken by the government of Bashar al-Assad and were in the process of reconstruction (Daher, 2019, p. 3). By politically contextualizing the image, the narrative is transformed. The cold, dramatic scene described in the above paragraph, when placed in context, portrays hope for transformation. The boy who walks towards the photo viewer, looking straight ahead, turns his back on the man who walks in the opposite direction, a past not revealed in the photo — the prospect of a future with the hope of reconstruction instead of a portrait of pain and despair.

The photo's narrative is understood, and the photographer's intent is exposed when we read the story published on March 8, 2018, by the *Los Angeles Times*. The report points to intensified fighting in the Douma region between FSA rebels and government forces. There are reports that chemical weapons were used and that many children died. Therefore, the role of photographer Hamza Al-Ajweh takes on a dimension loaded with multiple meanings. His photograph is used as a complaint aimed at the action of competent international authorities. His goal and that of other photographers/activists is only partially achieved, as there was no advance in investigations or military actions that could intervene in the civil war. The Syrian government hampered access to the locations that the photos and videos revealed, causing many international bodies to give up or

postpone their analysis. We can observe the example of the United Nations that decided, in 2018, to send teams responsible for investigating the facts, but without success (Kimball & Davenport, 2021). In addition, many Western countries became involved in the conflict, stressing that, if chemical weapons were to be used, there would be a military intervention to remove Bashar al-Assad from power. However, access was again denied, and the countries involved have not obtained sufficient evidence to justify an intervention (Kimball & Davenport, 2021).

For this reason, photographers such as Hamza Al-Ajweh are fundamental pieces in the rendering of accounts and the investigation of possible war crimes that many governments commit against their people to maintain their power. Without these reports and images, we would be hostage to made-up and biased speeches that would seek to hide the cruelty of the war camp, concealing both the violation of people's rights and war crimes.

Final Considerations

In this brief analysis that seeks to foster the debate about narratives elaborated through photos in the war field, we see through the lens of Hamza Al-Ajweh the need for questioning and (de)constructing stereotypes around the image. In addition, we point out that the readings can be considered "polysemic", in a sense used in the works of Barthes (1982/1990), as they can generate multiple meanings in the visualization process, revealing layers of analysis and interpretation. Therefore, there is a dynamic interaction between the photographer, the viewer, and the image.

The historical-geographical context of the Syrian confrontation cannot be ignored when we look at photographs in the war field. The photo in question shows a boy amidst the wreckage, pointing out suffering and possible loneliness/abandonment/wandering, implying that the child lives through and survives the war. However, the date of the photograph (2018) and its geographical space (Ghouta — suburb of Damascus) bring another possible narrative, as, in 2018, some media pointed to the victory of Bashar al-Assad (Ozkizilcik, 2021) and the beginning of the reconstruction works in the country (Daher, 2019, p. 3). By politically contextualizing the image, the narrative is transformed. The cold and dramatic scene described in the paragraph above, when placed in context, portrays hope for transformation; however, the question remains, as both narratives can be intertwined in the Syrian context.

Here, it is appropriate to use the concept of "visual citizenship", proposed by Azoulay (2012). For the author, the analysis of visual citizenship requires us to recognize that representational practices on human rights, humanitarian action, and development are embedded in long and complex histories — of charity, philanthropy, colonialism, empire, civilizing missions, capitalist expansion, among others — which tend to mask the political, social, and economic connections that link the viewers' history with dramas elsewhere. Azoulay's (2008) formulation postulates that photography — as a set of social practices — constitutes a "bond" or set of "political relations" between all parties involved in any photographic act: the photographed, the photographer, and the spectator. For Azoulay (2008), citizenship is never a fixed possession or status; rather, it depends on a continuous recognition process between citizens and governing power. The plurality at stake in citizenship, which guarantees equality among citizens and restricts governing power, finds a parallel in "photographs that bring traces of a plurality of political relationships that can be updated by the act of assisting, transforming and disseminating what is seen in claims that demand action" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 25). What the author calls the "civil contract of photography" is, therefore, a (re)conceptualization of citizenship through the lens of photography and analysis of photography through the framework of citizenship.

To understand this tangle of visual representations as political processes, however, we point to the need to analyze the discursive content of these representations and the acts of visualization themselves. Visibility and invisibility must be understood above all as political modes of existence, and representation must also be understood in visual and political terms, always remembering the

relationship between visibility and power. We share Köhn's (2016) perception that the existence of migrants in the public sphere is constituted by a dialectic of in/visibility, concealment, and exposure. The prominent visibility migrants receive in the media as stereotypes make them effectively invisible as individuals. "There further exists a disturbing connection between media representations and the state's politics of surveillance and control of migrants. Their visualization is thus potentially dangerous for many migrants as it conflicts with their need to remain invisible" (Köhn, 2016, p. 31).

In the context of dehumanizing rhetoric around immigration and growing compassion fatigue, the success of images in their ability to stimulate empathy through storytelling is undeniable. Instead of solidifying the political boundaries divided between "us" and "them", photography brings the two closer together, acting as a mirror to universalize the migrant experience. The work in the field of war, carried out by photographers and activists, is essential for the horrors to be recorded and shared around the world, bringing a sense of responsibility to representatives of countries outside the conflict and international agencies, ensuring the interruption of these horrors — even in completely chaotic situations, as can be seen in several Syrian cities. Without these reports, it would not be possible to fight for the protection and security of those who experience the horror of war, nor would it be possible to create public policies that protect people who migrate from war areas.

We end this article by sharing the perspective of Grau and Hinterwaldner (2021). They offer the contemporary idea of an iconographic perspective that is political, especially when it draws the reader's attention to the role that photography is increasingly playing in present-day sociopolitical issues, "such as climate change, finance, human migration and the surveillance society" (Grau & Hinterwaldner, 2021, p. 10).

Translation: Mikaele Prado de Sousa

Acknowledgments

This research was partially funded by Pipeq- PUC/São Paulo (project No. 18980).

Author Contributions

Suzana Ramos Coutinho developed the conceptualization and methodology of the proposed article, focusing on the migration-related sections and collaborating in the image-related analyses. She was responsible for securing funding from PUC and participated in the overall writing process (writing the original draft; review and editing). Jesner Esequiel dos Santos was responsible for the visualization, elaborating on the Syrian Arab Spring, and collaborating on image-related analysis. He participated in the overall writing process (writing the original draft; review and editing).

Biographical Notes

Suzana Ramos Coutinho is a photographer, anthropologist and PhD in religious studies (Lancaster University). She is a senior lecturer at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and Mackenzie Presbyterian University/São Paulo (Brazil), teaching at the Postgraduate Program in Education, Art and History of Culture. She is part of the editorial team of *REVER* (*Journal of Religious Studies/Revista de Estudos da Religião*) and the thematic editor of *Revista TRAMA* ("History of Culture" section). She is a member of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology, the International Society for the Sociology of Religion, and the International Visual Sociology Association. She is the head of the research group Center for the Interdisciplinary Studies on Migration and Image.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5629-1914

Email: sucoutinho@gmail.com

Address: Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, Arte e História da Cultura, Rua da Consolação, 930, prédio 25, térreo, Consolação, São Paulo, Brasil, CEP: 01302-907

Jesner Esequiel Santos is the author of *The Religious Path in the Syrian Arab Spring,* published by BTbooks in 2015. He is part of the master's program in Education, Art and History of Culture at Mackenzie Presbyterian University, linked to the Center for Education, Philosophy and Theology, São Paulo (Brazil). He is a member of the research group at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies on Migration and Image (Mackenzie Presbyterian University). He has a degree in theology from Mackenzie Presbyterian University (2015). He has a second bachelor's degree in theology from the Presbyterian Theological Seminary: Reverendo José Manoel da Conceição (2020).

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7705-657X

Email: jesner.eds@gmail.com

Address: Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, Arte e História da Cultura, Rua da Consolação, 930, prédio 25, térreo, Consolação, São Paulo, Brasil, CEP: 01302-907

Notes

1. Sharia is the legal system of Islam. It is a set of norms derived from the guidelines of the Koran, the speeches and conduct of the prophet Muhammad, and the jurisprudence of the fatwas — legal pronouncements of scholars of Islam. Sharia means "the clear path to the water" in a literal translation. See more in “Afeganistão: O Que É a Sharia, Lei Islâmica Que o Talebã Quer Aplicar no País?” (2021).

References

Afeganistão: O que é a sharia, lei islâmica que o talebã quer aplicar no país? (2021, August 17). *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-58251684

Appadurai, A. (1998). Putting hierarchy in its place. *Cultural Anthropology, 3*(1), 36–49.https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1988.3.1.02a00040

Araújo, C. (2012, July 16). Alauítas: A minoria síria que mata por temer ser aniquilada. *Veja*. http://veja.abril.com.br/noticia/mundo/alauitas-a-minoria-siria-que-mata-por-temer-ser-aniquilada

Azoulay, A. (2008). *The civil contract of photography*. MIT Press.

Azoulay, A. (2012). *Civil imagination: A political ontology of photography.* Verso.

Barthes, R. (1990). *O óbvio e o obtuso: Ensaios sobre fotografia, cinema, teatro e música – Ensaio críticos III* (L. Novaes, Trans.). Nova Fronteira. (Original work published 1982)

Bell, E., & Davison, J. (2013). Visual management studies: Empirical and theoretical approaches. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *15*(2), 167–184. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2012.00342.x

Bleiker, R. (2012). *Aesthetics and world politics.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Bowen, J. (2012). *The Arab uprisings: The people want the fall of the regime*. Simon & Schuster UK.

Brummitt, W. (1973). *Photography is...* American Photographic Book Publishing.

Bulos, N. (2018, March 8). Thousands displaced, aid delivery halted as violence consumes Syrian enclave. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-syria-ghouta-20180308-story.html

Burgin, V. (1982). Looking at photographs. In V. Burgin (Ed.), *Thinking photography* (pp. 142–153). Macmillan.

CNN. (2013, February 5). *Christian militia standing behind Assad* [Video]. YouTube. http://youtu.be/FQIrSR6tKJg

Cogo, D. (2001). Mídia, imigração e interculturalidade: Mapeando as estratégias de midiatização dos processos migratórios e das falas imigrantes no contexto brasileiro. *Comunicação & Informação*, *4*(1/2), 11–32. https://doi.org/10.5216/c&i.v4i1/2.23453

Coulter, G. (2013). Gerhard Richter's use of photography to challenge our understanding of the real. *International Journal of Arts and Commerce*, *2*(10), 83–92.

Dados, N. (2010). Liminal transformations: Folding the surface of the photograph. *Conserveries Mémorielles*, (7), 1–16.

Daher, J. (2019, September 4). The paradox of Syria's reconstruction. *Carnegie Middle East Center*. https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/09/04/paradox-of-syria-s-reconstruction-pub-79773

Falk, F. (2010). Invasion, infection, invisibility: An iconology of illegalized immigration. In C. Bischoff, F. Falk, & S. Kafehsy (Eds.), *Images of illegalized immigration: Towards a critical iconology of politics* (pp. 83–100). Transcript.

Fayyad, H. (2021, February 10). The Arab Spring: A social media revolution? [Vídeo]. *Middle East Eye*. https://www.middleeasteye.net/video/arab-spring-social-media-revolution

Fildis, A. T. (2012). Roots of Alawite-Sunni rivalry in Syria. *Middle East Policy Council, 19*(2), 148–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00541.x

Glass, C. (2017, October 25). *The Syrian civil war is decided*. Stratfor. https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/syrian-civil-war-decided

Grau, O., & Hinterwaldner, I. (Eds.). (2021). *Retracing political dimensions: Strategies in contemporary new media art*. De Gruyter.

Grossman, A., & O'Brien, A. (Eds.). (2007). *Projecting migration: Transcultural documentary practice.* Wallflower Press.

Ianchovichina, E., & Devarajan, S. (2021, June 21–25). *Why does the Arab Spring keep coming back?* [Conference presentation]. Annual Bank Conference on Development Economics 2021: Global Unrest. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/8215471cb2c756b0908a67de4e0d9ca8-0050022021/original/Why-Does-the-Arab-Spring-Keep-Coming-Back.pdf

Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. (2011, January 31). *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894

Jameson, F. (1992). *The geopolitical aesthetic: Cinema and space in the world system*. Indiana

University Press.

Kafehsy, S. (2010). Images of victims in trafficking in women: The Euro campaign against trafficking in women in Switzerland. In C. Bischoff, F. Falk, & S. Kafehsy (Eds.), *Images of illegalized immigration. Towards a critical iconology of politics* (pp.71–81). Transcript.

Kaplan, R. D. (1993, February). Syria: Identity crisis. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/02/syria-identity-crisis/303860/

Kimball, D., & Davenport, K. (2021). Timeline of Syrian chemical weapons activity, 2012-2021. *Arms Control Association*. https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity

Köhn, S. (2016). *Mediating mobility: Visual anthropology in the age of migration*. Wallflower Press.

Langmann, S., & Pick, D. (2018). *Photography as a social research method.* Springer.

Maigret, E. (2010). *Sociologia da comunicação e das mídias* (M. Bagno, Trans.). Senac. (Original work published 2003)

Malkki, L. (1995). *Purity and exile: Violence, memory and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago University Press.

Marks, L. U. (2008). Experience – Information – Image: A historiography of unfolding. Arab cinema as example. *Cultural Studies Review*, *14*(1), 85–98. https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v14i1.2100

Momani, B. (2014, April 10–12). *The Arab Spring is genuine revolution, but a bumpy and arduous road ahead* [Communication]. The Institute for New Economic Thinking and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) Annual Meeting, Toronto, Canadá. https://www.ineteconomics.org/uploads/papers/MOMANI_Bessma_-Arab-Spring-a-Genuine-Revolutionary-Movement.pdf

Ozkizilcik, O. (2021). War without end: Who will be king-maker in Syria in 2022? *TRT World*. https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/war-without-end-who-will-be-king-maker-in-syria-in-2022-53176

Santos, M., Petrus, R., & Loureiro, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Recortes interdisciplinares sobre migrações e deslocamentos.* Léo Christiano Editorial.

Seale, P. (1989). *Asad of Syria: The struggle for the Middle East*. University of California Press.

Seale, P. (2011). Os dilemas da dinastia de Al-Assad. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. https://diplomatique.org.br/os-dilemas-da-dinastia-de-al-assad/

Silva, J. C. J., Bógus, L. M. M., & Silva, S. A. G. J. (2017). Os fluxos migratórios mistos e os entraves à proteção aos refugiados. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de População*, *34*(1), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.20947/S0102-3098a0003

Slackman, M. (2011, March 25). Syrian troops open fire on protesters in several cities. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html

Slim, R. (2012, February 24). *Unite Syria's opposition first.* MEI@75. https://www.mei.edu/publications/unite-syrias-opposition-first

Soszynski, M. (2006). How do pictures represent? *Philosophy Now*, (57), 20–21.

Spencer, S. (2011). *Visual research methods in the social sciences: Awakening visions*. Routledge.

Syrian Arab Republic. (2021). 2021 *Needs and response summary*. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/som_summary_2021.pdf

Valenta, M., Jakobsen, J., Župarić-Iljić, D., & Halilovich, H. (2020). Syrian refugee migration: Transitions in migrant statuses and future scenarios of Syrian mobility. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, *39*(2), 153–176. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdaa002

van Dijk, T. (1999). Discourse and racism. *Discourse and Society*, *10*(2), 147–148. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926599010002001

Warren, S. (2005). Photography and voice in critical qualitative management research. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, *18*(6), 861–882. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513570510627748

Wood, G. (2017). *A guerra do fim dos tempos* (L. T. Motta, Trans.). Companhia das Letras. (Original work published 2016)

Wright, T. (2002). Moving images: The media representation of refugees. *Visual Studies*, *17*(1), 53–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586022000005053

Wright, T. (2016). Press photography and visual rhetoric. In E. Margolis & L. Pauwels (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of visual research methods* (pp. 317–336). Sage.