Document generated on 05/18/2025 4:31 a.m.

**Imaginations**
Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies
Revue d'études interculturelles de l'image

# Spaces of Empathy: Visual Strategies in Photojournalistic Imagery of Migration

Maria Nilsson

Volume 13, Number 2, 2022

Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094931ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.8

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

York University

ISSN

1918-8439 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Nilsson, M. (2022). Spaces of Empathy: Visual Strategies in Photojournalistic Imagery of Migration. *Imaginations*, *13*(2), 181–206. https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.8

Article abstract

This essay explores visual representations of migration by drawing on a Swedish case to reflect on broader questions regarding the position of the witness, including the photographer and the distant spectator, and on how photographs may contribute to an understanding of the experience of forced migration. Through an interpretative analysis of imagery recognized by the Swedish Picture of the Year contest, I identified mostly empathetic visualizations, according to the five positions of visibility suggested by Chouliaraki and Stolic. Engaging a different set of imagery, I delved into an extended exploration of one family over a span of four years as a narrative of lived experiences of forced migration. Methodologically, this essay begins within the area of photojournalism, but suggests the inclusion of varied visual forms and genres in the empirical materials.

© Maria Nilsson, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

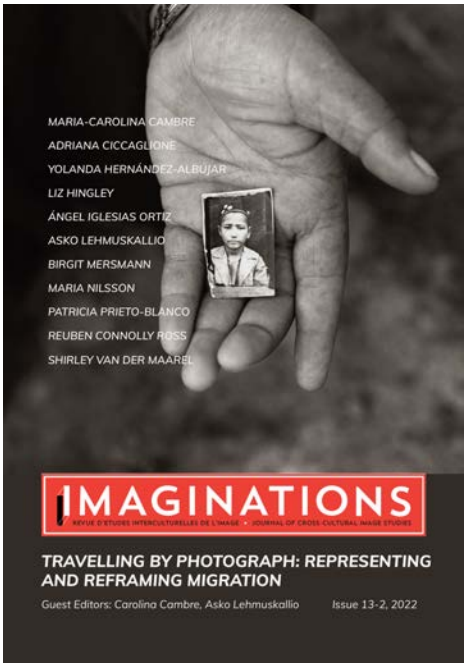
https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

IMAGINATIONS
REVUE D'ETUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE • JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES




IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES | REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy and instructions for contributors:
http://imaginations.glendon.yorku.ca

## Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration
## Guest Editors: Carolina Cambre, Asko Lehmuskallio
## 2022-11-09

Cover image: Fazal Sheikh's presentation of a portrait shown to him in 1997 at an Afghan refugee village in Ghazi, Northern Pakistan, of a child killed in Soviet bombardment © Fazal Sheikh

To cite this article:
Nilsson, Maria."Spaces of Empathy: Visual Strategies in Photojournalistic Imagery of Migration." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2022, pp. 181-206, doi: 10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.8.

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.8

The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a Creative Commons 4.0 International Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions. Certain works referenced herein may be separately licensed, or the author has exercised their right to fair dealing under the Canadian Copyright Act.

# SPACES OF EMPATHY: VISUAL STRATEGIES IN PHOTOJOURNALISTIC IMAGERY OF MIGRATION

MARIA NILSSON

This essay explores visual representations of migration by drawing on a Swedish case to reflect on broader questions regarding the position of the witness, including the photographer and the distant spectator, and on how photographs may contribute to an understanding of the experience of forced migration. Through an interpretative analysis of imagery recognized by the Swedish Picture of the Year contest, I identified mostly empathetic visualizations, according to the five positions of visibility suggested by Chouliaraki and Stolic. Engaging a different set of imagery, I delved into an extended exploration of one family over a span of four years as a narrative of lived experiences of forced migration. Methodologically, this essay begins within the area of photojournalism, but suggests the inclusion of varied visual forms and genres in the empirical materials.

Cet essai examine les représentations visuelles de la migration en s'inspirant sur un cas suédois, afin de réfléchir à des questions plus larges concernant la position du témoin, y compris celle du photographe et du spectateur distant, et à la manière dont les photos peuvent contribuer à la compréhension de l'expérience de la migration forcée. À travers une analyse interprétative de l'imagerie reconnue par le concours suédois de l'Image de l'Année, j'identifie des visualisations essentiellement empathiques selon les cinq positions de visibilité suggérées par Chouliaraki et Stolic. En utilisant un ensemble différent d'images, j'ai exploré en profondeur une famille sur une période de quatre ans comme un récit d'expériences vécues de migration forcée. En termes de méthodologie, cet essai débute dans le domaine du photojournalisme, mais suggère l'inclusion de formes et de genres visuels divers dans les matériaux empiriques.

## INTRODUCTION

"The pictures I didn't take on the Sea of Death," reads the headline of an article written by a Swedish photojournalist covering a rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea (Hoelstad). The text is accompanied by the sole image the photographer made that day, of a man and a young boy clinging to a piece of wood to stay afloat as the rescue boat approaches. In the article, the photojournalist shares her observations of men, women, and children in the water, and describes the crew attempting to bring the refugees to safety. The image-maker shares additional information: of a young girl who drowned and who was a close relative of the father and the boy she photographed, and of helping to administer CPR to another child who survived. Yet their main focus is the description of what an image might have shown had she taken it.

Over one million refugees crossed the Mediterranean hoping to reach the European Union during 2015, according to the UNHCR.[1] The rescue operation described above took place in the fall of 2015, shortly after the death of Alan Kurdi, the young Syrian boy who perished while trying to cross the Mediterranean with his family. As is widely known, images of the Syrian boy's lifeless body went viral, causing a debate about the ethical boundaries of photojournalism (e.g. Fehrenbach and Rodogno; Mortensen et al.). The images also contributed to policy debates about migration. The Kurdi imagery in particular became a symbol in the solidary movement "Refugees welcome" formed in various cities to support refugees as they arrived (Proitz). Thus, beyond the apparent news value of photographs from global conflicts and humanitarian crises, the images are instruments shaping public opinion, in this case about migration and about people forced to flee.

The photojournalist's account inspired this essay by raising a series of questions: about how photographs contribute to our understanding of the experience of forced migration; about who has the right to photograph; and about the responsibilities of witnesses, including photographers and spectators at a geographical distance. These questions frame the focus of my inquiry in this paper, and I explore them

by engaging with literature on visual media frames, witnessing and spectatorship, and by drawing on visual examples, specifically from Swedish photojournalism. Sweden received over 160,000 asylum applications during 2015, twice as many as the previous year, the increase due in part to the conflict in Syria.[2] Until 2016, the country's migration policy had been welcoming, in particular in 2014 when Sweden was the only country in the world to guarantee asylum to Syrian applicants.[3] However, in 2016, a law was introduced to reduce the number of applications, purportedly for a more sustainable policy.[4] My focus on Sweden as a case study, and as a node for global migration, brings larger issues about witnessing and agency as they relate to photography into view.

As part of this process, methodological questions on photojournalism and migration arise. Journalism research focusing on news photographs has identified recurring, frequently reductive frames of migration. A common empirical focus in visual framing research is on images in news stories selected as empirical materials (see Fahmy et al.). While these studies contribute knowledge about how imagery supports certain recurring media frames and tropes, there appears to be less of a focus in the literature on visual reportage and other visual forms. Furthermore, as Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic discuss in their analysis of news photographs of refugees, a narrow methodological focus on binary positions—with the refugee visualized as either victim or threat—may risk overlooking ambiguities and alternative positions of visibility.

The interpretative analyses presented in the following pages focus on two interrelated sets of images, meant to serve as examples of photojournalistic practice, strategies, and visualizations. The first set of images were made between 2015 and 2017 and recognized by the Swedish Picture of the Year contest. I chose to analyze contest entries since images recognized by a jury of peers are indicative of professional discourses, norms, and ideals (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos; Kedra and Sommier). I conducted a qualitative interpretative analysis in order to explore how the imagery visualized refugee migration, drawing on Chouliaraki and Stolic's typology of visibility.

The second set of images are photographs and videos published in extended coverage about a family fleeing the war in Syria, specifically the family the photojournalist encountered during the rescue operation described above. News photographs frequently focus on moments of crisis. Here, I instead consider a series of articles about one family published between 2015 and 2019. The aim is to address an aspect of visualization I believe is not frequently included in journalism research about migration, that is, a person's experience beyond the flight and arrival in the host country. Through a narrative analysis of imagery interacting with the texts, I explore how the extended coverage contributes to our understanding of the family's experience.

The following section contains a targeted review of literature on visualizations of migration in the news media and writings in the field of visual studies, as well as writings on witnessing and agency. The subsequent section explains the empirical examples and methods of analysis. Next follows a presentation of the analyses, while in the concluding section I reflect on the ethics of photographing, the position of the photographer and the spectator as witnesses, and how images may contribute to spectators' engagement and understanding of the experience of flight.

## WITNESSING AND VISUALLY FRAMING MIGRATION

The photograph is the foremost tool for journalistic witnessing, particularly crucial in breaking news and crisis coverage (Zelizer). According to Stuart Allan, "The importance of bearing witness to what is transpiring in harrowing circumstances is a lynchpin in war and conflict reporting" (133).

A photojournalist is a witness on site who must be close to events to secure images (Bock). Their work is shaped by various factors—including the assignment—such as whether they work for a news organization or an NGO (Dencik and Allan). Furthermore, briefs or preferences expressed by editors may guide the shoot, such as a request for a certain type of image or visualization, which may preclude alternative vantage points based on what takes place on site (Bengtsson Lundin). Furthermore, freelance photographers in particular may

adapt their approach to themes, topics or aesthetic approaches that might yield publication opportunities (Láb and Štefaniková). Thus, the routines of media organizations and visual discourses, including those promoted by photo contests, contribute to shaping how photojournalists approach the assignment and the kind of pictures they make.

Another factor is previous coverage and established conventions for visualizing the topic, which the work of the photojournalist corresponds to and tends to reproduce. Research on media frames and representations of migration specifically has identified two recurring themes or tropes in news photographs of migration: the refugee as either victim or threat (see Bleiker et al.; Chouliaraki and Stolic). The figure of the refugee as victim may evoke empathy through scenes of massification, such as in refugee camps (Wright). However, while conveying a sense of urgency, such portrayals may risk reducing refugees to anonymous, passive, and distant bodies without agency (Hyndman, qtd. in Chouliaraki and Stolic, 1164). The trope of the migrant mother and child in need, for instance, is useful in journalistic narratives of polarization and conflict. Yet, while images of children may evoke compassion, the news media have been criticized for further exposing people in a vulnerable position. Research on migration coverage during 2015 specifically addresses some of these questions in analyses of the news media's publications of images of Alan Kurdi (see Fehrenbach and Rodogno; Mortensen, Allan, and Peters; Mortensen and Trenz; Proitz).

The figure of the refugee as threat, meanwhile, may evoke fear and justify securitization discourses and policies (Chouliaraki and Stolic). This visual figure feeds into a journalistic narrative building on simplification, and is part of a discourse where migration is considered a threat—for instance to sovereignty or national or political ideology (Nair; Wolthers). While the male refugee is less frequently portrayed as a victim, the figure of the refugee as threat has been found to be predominantly male and frequently young (Kedra and Sommier; Musarò). Furthermore, the male refugee has been associated with terrorism in media coverage (Chouliaraki and Stolic). In addition, borders, which are frequently visualized in the coverage, are al-

so a prominent part of discourses of securitization (Chouliaraki and Georgiou; Kedra and Sommier; Nair).

Visual strategies, alternative frames, and the news photograph as an instrument for empathy have also been identified in studies focusing on media coverage of migration in the context of 2015. Chouliaraki and Stolic, in an analysis of photographs published in newspapers across Europe, found various positions of visibility, each encouraging different "public dispositions" to act (1172). While these authors found few examples of the welcoming position "hospitality," they attribute this to the limitations of civil society. Furthermore, an analysis of entries to the global photojournalism contest World Press Photo identified an emergent rhetorical figure, that of the nurturing father (Kedra and Sommier). These authors identified a number of other rhetorical strategies and explored narrative in visual projects as an interaction between image-maker and migrants. An analysis of a photo reportage published on a mainstream news site, in another study, identified a visual language and an unusual story focus, yielding low news value yet a space to connect to the experience of migrants marooned in a no-man's land (Nair).

The photojournalist's work is also shaped by access, and by actors who control the setting and may set events in motion for the benefit of the camera (Bock; Sliwinski). In the Mediterranean region during the height of the migration flows of 2015, restrictions of access and the presence of a large number of photojournalists reportedly resulted in a saturation in media attention for those already in a vulnerable position and a certain lack of variety in the visualizations (Bengtsson Lundin). Furthermore, the presence of a photojournalist may help but may also put the people photographed at risk, an awareness expressed by image-makers in studies addressing the ethics of photographing (Linfield; Bengtsson Lundin). People in a vulnerable position are dependent on journalists' personal and professional ethics enshrined in codes of conduct and practice. Yet, depending on the situation, they may not be in a position to decline to be photographed. Some photojournalists have articulated awareness of this power imbalance in the photographic situation, and may attempt to mitigate this, such as by asking for permission to photograph or framing the

image to cast the person in a respectful manner (Thomson; Bengtsson Lundin).

Furthermore, while the encounter between the photographic subject and image-maker is represented in the resulting image, unlike a reporter, a photojournalist seldom has the space to reflect upon it within the news format. However, some photojournalists today use social media, such as Instagram or Twitter, to post images and reflect about the topic or experience (Pantti), while others write articles about their experience. Thus, social media, as well as other venues for a personal form of storytelling and reflections, are resources some photojournalists draw upon in their work. The image-maker can also be personally affected, according to research finding that covering crises may have a traumatic impact (Bock; Linfield; Yaschur).

Witnessing and the civic role of the spectator have been explored by media studies and visual studies scholarship. Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski have expounded on the notion of a media witnessing that implicates both seeing and saying. John Peters, though not writing specifically about visual images, considers witnessing a civic act different from the act of seeing, which does not necessarily compel to acting on what one has seen. Ariella Azoulay suggests that photographs can offer a space for empathetic contemplation through the creation of a citizenry of photography. Sharon Sliwinski, in the book *Human Rights in Camera,* draws on the writings of Hannah Arendt and other scholars to examine the emergence of human rights as a juridical concept, and the role of the media and in particular photography in exposing human rights abuses. Based on a set of case studies from the 20th century, Sliwinski proposes that images as an "aesthetic meeting" may produce a community of spectators. She further argues that the act of photographing and viewing images are a constitutive part of investigations of human rights violations. However, "When world events capture distant spectators' attention, what is starkly evident—and deeply important to reflect upon—is the great diversity of affective responses" (33).

A number of scholars have remarked on a tension between the public's high expectations on photography and the transformative po-

tential of witnessing injustices, and at the same time a disappointment with the shortcoming of photographs to yield those results. Among them is Susie Linfield, who in *The Cruel Radiance*: *Photography and Political Violence*, an examination of the potential of photography to affect change, remarks: "…Seeing does not necessarily translate into believing, caring, or acting. That is the dialectic, and the failure, at the heart of the photograph of suffering" (33). To remedy this, Linfield proposes an ethics of showing on the part of image-maker, the news media and the public.

Sliwinski, in turn, recounts the experience of a photojournalist covering atrocities committed in the Balkans in the 1990s, believing that the images would provide proof leading to international intervention. This photographer later expressed disillusionment and doubts about his work's ability to affect change (Sliwinski 119-122). Examining the international community's failure to intervene in the atrocities in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia and other human rights violations although evidence existed, Sliwinsky attributes this to the news media's failure to cover the crises thoroughly and accurately, as well as a lack of political will. Furthermore, she draws on a number of scholars and survivors of atrocities, including Theodor Adorno, who, as cited by Sliwinski, critiques a misguided belief that injustices will not be repeated if the international community is aware of historical atrocities (136-138). Nevertheless, in the work of human rights, according to Sliwinski, the task of the spectator is to bear witness to that which cannot be put into words, "the differend," attributed to Jean François Lyotard, in order to conduct the "attendant labor of finding idioms for them" (Sliwinski 33).

## EMPIRICAL MATERIALS AND METHODS OF ANALYSES

In order to address how imagery recognized by the Swedish Picture of the Year contest visualized refugee migration, in terms of the positions of visibility, I selected entries on the topic of refugee migration that were nominated[5] in *Årets Bild,* The Swedish Picture of the Year, the country's leading photojournalism contest. I chose to study contest entries since images recognized by a jury of

peers are indicative of professional discourses, norms, and ideals (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos; Kedra and Sommier). Furthermore, photojournalism contest imagery is widely circulated, thus potentially reaching a wide public (Kedra and Sommier).[6]

I selected entries nominated in the 2016, 2017, and 2018 contests. The three consecutive years were selected to coincide with extensive migration into Sweden. A total of 15 entries on the topic of refugee migration were identified and included, among them ten single-image entries, four photo reportages, and one multimedia entry. The entries spanned different journalistic and photographic categories and genres, including domestic and international news, everyday life and reportage.[7] I conducted a qualitative interpretative analysis of the selected imagery, drawing on Chouliaraki and Stolic's typology of visibility: *biological life*, which refers to a state or situation where physical survival is at stake, *empathy*, *threat*, *hospitality* and *self-reflexivity*—each encouraging different "public dispositions" to act (1172). I share the view of these authors that the typologies identified are neither finite nor stable.

When exploring how extended coverage may contribute to our understanding of the experience of forced migration, I selected a nominated image in the contest that was part of a story that received attention in Sweden at the time, and followed the publication of an article written by a photojournalist taking part in the rescue operation in the Mediterranean that I mentioned in the opening section of this piece (Dagens Nyheter; Sveriges Radio P4 Sjuhärad). This image portrayed a Syrian father and son who had made their way to Sweden after being rescued by a coast guard boat sponsored by the media organization Schibstedt, the owner of the newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Aftonbladet.* The rescue operation was financed through a fundraising campaign by the two newspapers to benefit the Swedish Coast Guard, which contributed two vessels and volunteer crew (Östman). The project ran for about six months during 2015 and 2016 and saved nearly 2,000 lives (Jelmini). The initiative took place at a time when numerous refugees died as they attempted to make the Mediterranean crossing in overcrowded boats in order to

reach the European Union. The image recognized by the contest jury was made by a staff photographer of the *Svenska Dagbladet* newspaper who had been on assignment on board the ship. Later on, reconnecting with the family once they had made it to Sweden, this photojournalist photographed and made videos for additional stories about them, and also wrote about the experience. I conducted a narrative analysis of articles and other media forms published in *Svenska Dagbladet* between 2015 and 2019, with a particular focus on visual imagery. My aim was to construe a narrative of the family's experience.

## SPACES OF EMPATHY

While imagery corresponding to the position of biological life, according to the typology, may create a space for solidarity, there is arguably a more limited space for agency on the part of the person portrayed. This was also found in some of the examined imagery—such as in a photo reportage of unnamed people pictured in a refugee camp, and children pictured near drowning. Media portrayals of refugees have been criticized for taking them out of context through prevalent figures or tropes reducing them to "refugees" without a connection to place and without a past. According to this critique, readers learn little about the cause of the flight, or about the experience of those who flee. In the entries I examined, underlying causes as well as reception in the host country were part of some, though not all, visualizations and accompanying captions. Place was present in some entries, though refugees were also frequently shown separated from settings and place, such as in a series of photographs focusing on the journey.[8] In another international news reportage entry, the visual story is sequenced to begin with the cause of flight—war—and conclude with journey's end.[9] This reportage visualizes the entire journey, and since there are different individuals and settings in each picture, I interpret the journey as an experience shared by all refugees seeking asylum in Europe. I have identified a range of positions in this series, from biological life and empathy to hospitality, an interpretation based on the editing of

the photo reportage where the narrative leads up to arrival in Sweden in the final frame.

Empathy was the most prevalent position found in the materials. This was particularly the case for images of children. This is not surprising, given that images of children, widely used in humanitarian photography, appeal to spectators' desire to protect the innocent. Furthermore, photography is a tool for journalism to evoke strong emotion. However, children *were* a major part of the refugee story in 2015 since entire families migrated, crossing the sea and making their way across the continent, as was the case in Europe. The contest jury selected a number of images of children to represent the refugee story during the selected years, including the image selected as the top news photograph of the 2015.[10] A more surprising finding was the empathetic portrayal of men. Maternal figures are frequently positioned to engender empathy in visualizations of refugees, according to the literature. Single images of men among the contest entries included a news photograph of a young man visually portrayed as a protagonist through placement as well as image composition.[11] The young man is depicted carrying a baby while walking along a highway, while other refugees are seen behind him in the distance. Shot from a low vantage point, the young man towers above viewers. Yet, his gesture cradling the child evokes parental care more commonly seen in representations of mother figures. The protective father figure appeared in other imagery of families, including gestures of shielding children from injury or harm,[12] echoing the findings of Kedra and Sommier who identified a nurturing father figure as an emerging rhetorical device. There were in fact fewer images of mother figures than fathers and young men in the examined materials from the Swedish photo contest. While this visual focus may be due to various factors, such as a family waiting to be reunited with female family members who are still in the country of origin, it nevertheless recurred in the examined materials.

The position of threat was not as common, perhaps a reflection of the empirical material and the contest aim to reward best-practice visualizations. I identified only one example of explicit threat: in one

of the few breaking-news images on the topic, showing a male asylum seeker being restrained after attacking the minister of migration during the minister's visit to a hospital temporarily housing refugees.[13] While the image and caption do not provide information about the reasons for the altercation, the scene nevertheless shows conflict, which is absent from other examined entries set in Sweden. A possibly latent threat, in turn, can be discerned in visualizations of refugees in transit or in a position of uncertainty, such as the news photograph of border police checking the papers of two young men on a train, the young men, seated, looking up at the police officers standing above them.[14] The possible threat, as I interpret it, is suggested from the vantage point closely aligned with the police officers. In line with Chouliaraki and Stolic's findings, a non-threating position can be turned into threat, depending on the context in which images circulate and shifting discourses about migration.

Hospitality emerged as a position in different entries showing interactions between father and child from two different families awaiting asylum in Sweden. In one of them, an everyday-life category entry of a father and son fishing, their interaction is foregrounded in a documentary-mode image appearing to catch a slice of life unbeknownst to the photographic subjects.[15] This image, which depicts a moment of bonding, will be further discussed in the following pages in connection with the *Svenska Dagbladet* coverage of the Syrian family. Everyday routines were also the focus of a reportage about a family residing in temporary housing at a camp site along with European migrants.[16] Such everyday scenes provide points of connection. The photo reportage from the camp site shows adaption to life in the new country, although in a transitory setting intended for vacation trips rather than migration. This contradiction is foregrounded by the season. It is winter, a time when the camp site is closed to vacationers, yet the facility is kept open to rent space to migrants, a sign of a shortage of housing for refugees in the country.

While the reportage from the camp suggests a lack of hospitality, given the migrants' apparent visual isolation from Swedish society, the content—including activities and socialization in the camp—and

the mood rather indicate that the image-maker intended to frame the story in a positive light. However, other contest entries can be read as critical of Sweden's reception of the refugees, such as the news photograph showing families camping out in the snow at the point of entry,[17] and the photo reportage of an immigration bureau office void of people, an anonymous setting for a first encounter with the host country.[18] I interpret these visualizations as self-reflexive and offering a critical view of how refugees fare as they arrive in Sweden.

## ENCOUNTERING THE SWIRAKLY FAMILY

A video posted on the *Svenska Dagbladet* news site, made by a staff photojournalist on assignment to cover a rescue operation of refugees in the Mediterranean, visualizes the experience of encountering death and being faced with the dilemma of whether or not to photograph the scene, an encounter discussed in the opening section of this essay (Hoelstad). The video focuses on the crew and their frustration, expressed in the soundtrack, at not being able to save everyone. A photograph the photojournalist had made previously, of a man and his son clinging to a board to stay afloat as they are about to be rescued, is inserted into the video. Through camera movement due to the rocking of the boat, the video evokes a feeling of chaos and confusion on the cramped deck.

The photojournalist first encountered the Syrian family the Swiraklys on the day of their rescue described above, as she took part in a fruitless attempt to save the life of a little girl, a cousin of the boy and the niece of the father of the family she would go on to cover in several stories. The photograph she made a few months later in Sweden, of the father and his son fishing in a tranquil lake, is a striking contrast. (The image, recognized by the Swedish photo contest, was discussed in the previous section.) The image was published as part of a photo reportage about the family (Fröberg and Hoelstad, 7 August 2016). Another image from this reportage made after the family's arrival in Sweden shows the boy swimming in a lake. According to the caption, this is the moment when the boy overcomes his fear of water after the near-drowning experience.

The photojournalist and a reporter who also was on board the rescue vessel published additional stories about the family and their lives in Sweden during the next four years. The father and son are photographed living in a sparsely decorated apartment, communicating with the mother and the boy's sister and older brother who are in Syria waiting for asylum permits and reunification in Sweden (Fröberg and Hoelstad, 3 April 2016; Fröberg, 25 February 2017). In another story, the photojournalist and reporter cover their arrival and reunification at the Stockholm airport (Fröberg and Treijs). Other reportages—consisting of text and photographs or video—show the boy starting school, and the father waiting to begin a Swedish course that will lead to chances of employment (Fröberg and Hoelstad, 4 November 2017; Treijs). The family is also shown reflecting on their experience (Fröberg and Hoelstad, 9 February 2019). In a video posted on the *Svenska Dagbladet* news site accompanying one of the stories, the father, seated in a studio against a dark backdrop and with a grave expression, narrates his family's harrowing experience of flight (Fröberg and Hoelstad, 7 August 2016). He recalls the war and his son's traumatic experience of the sea crossing. This is the most extensive testimony from a family member in the analyzed coverage. This testimony evokes Sliwinski's notion that some experiences cannot be narrated. In the case of this father, it apparently took a year before he was ready to tell his story to the media.

A few years after their arrival in Sweden, the family appears to be in a sort of limbo in some images depicting social isolation and passivity. The family members are shown interacting with each other, yet with few other social contacts outside their home, except at the son's school. The isolation may be due to the fact that the parents are not yet able to work or study, as explained in one of the articles, or it could be the result of the journalists' presence and story focus. A certain formality is conveyed in some imagery—such as in an image showing family members waving from the balcony as the journalists arrive (Fröberg, 1 January 2016), a photograph filling a descriptive function in the story. In contrast, other images, interpretative of a mood or feeling, convey the relationship between members of the family. Thus, there are various genres or forms of photojournalism

in these stories, ranging from those that are visually driven to others more bound to the text and the topic of the story, each filling different functions in the reportages (Langton).

Told over time and in different media formats and genres, the coverage focuses on a family moving from the status of refugees to settling in the host country. Readers learn about their background and experiences, their reasons for fleeing, the trauma of flight, and the challenges of life in a new country. Such a personal focus on one family or person to represent a larger issue, in this case migration, is a common strategy in journalism, frequently used to personalize a complex issue. In light of the literature on media visualizations of migration, we may consider the strategy humanizing in that it gives a certain agency to the subjects of the story, such as in the aforementioned video testimony about the crossing of the Mediterranean. In contrast to the video and imagery from the rescue that directly visualize trauma, most other visualizations of the family made in Sweden have an everyday-life, non-dramatic focus. Emotions are however visualized in moments of celebration, such as the family's reunification at the airport captured on video.

Another element of the narrative developing over time—visually as well as in the texts—is the journalists' and, by extension, the newspaper's support of the family's striving to build a future in Sweden and their advocacy for them, such as participating in meetings with representatives of the Swedish Migration board. The interaction between journalists and family members are represented within visual imagery and in the text in various ways. It is foregrounded in the coverage of the boat rescue, as related by the photojournalist in her article, and in the video and photographs she made that day. Here, the photojournalist expresses the emotional impact the rescue experience had on her, recounting the impossibility of photographing and even accurately describing what she witnessed. This can be seen as an ethics of showing, following Linfield, and a witnessing where enunciation through writing makes journalism into a civic act (Peters).

Thus, emotion and connectedness are foregrounded in the various narratives, through a focus on family members' perspectives and in the inclusion of the journalists, in particular the photographer and her bond with the family, such as in a description of her interaction with the boy. Furthermore, readers learn that the family who lost their daughter at sea names their newborn girl Malin, after the photographer, who took part of the effort to save their daughter (Fröberg and Hoelstad, 8 December 2016, Sveriges Radio P4 Gävleborg). Thus, the encounter and relationship between photojournalist and the family are an integral part of the narrative.

## DISCUSSION: THE TASK OF THE WITNESS

My interpretative analysis of contest entries found various visualizations of refugees and their experience, including a focus on families and a nurturing father figure, in effect evading a stereotypical portrayal of migrants as distant, anonymous masses. The typology with five positions allowed for the identification of a broader range of visibility than the more commonly identified binaries in visual framing research, victim and threat. The most prevalent position found in my material was empathy, echoing the literature.

I believe there are a number of possible factors resulting in the prevalence of empathy in my materials rather than hospitality and self-reflexivity, which may invite identification and reflection and potentially foreground agency on the part of the subject. One factor could be the visual parameters and frames favored by the contest jury. Another could be the photojournalists' choice of contest entries, catering to a prevailing trope, theme, or topic within the professional discourse. Yet another possibility is that assignments and media focus on crisis, conflict, and impact. When it comes to migration, media focus is frequently on crisis rather than structural issues or long-term processes. For instance, in 2015, the humanitarian situation in the Mediterranean called for media attention, and so did the movement of refugees through the continent as well as their arrival and reception in the host country. Each topic had high news value related to

humanitarian issues and asylum policy. However, the experience of people after the immediate crisis, once they have moved into housing, albeit temporary, doesn't appear to be in the media's focus as much. Another important factor is, of course, that there may be a lack of civic engagement on the part of the spectators, as Chouliaraki and Stolic suggest.

A subjective point of view was found in several contest entries, a departure from a distant and neutral position commonly associated with journalism. An important aspect of a photographer's perspective lies in the choice of images or story to enter in a professional contest. A subjective approach and personal storytelling may be due to the contest policy, specifically that entries can include unpublished imagery. As a result, in the submission of entries in this contest, an image-maker can edit the story to make a certain argument. Furthermore, a recent subjective turn in photojournalism favors stories and images focusing on individuals and personalized stories (Nilsson 2020).

The recurring stories about the Swirakly family are shaped by the norms and routines of the news organization as much as by the journalists conducting the coverage. However, most images and videos published in these stories were demonstrably the result of collaboration and the consent of the family members to be photographed, filmed, and interviewed. Furthermore, in some entries, such as videos, family members speak about their experience, thus narrating in their own voices. This, in turn, may open space for agency and engagement with spectators, in particular since serial coverage potentially explores experiences or issues in depth.

Furthermore, while personal interaction between journalists and the people they cover challenges the professional code of neutrality and impartiality and is generally frowned upon in news coverage, such a connection is frequently foregrounded in reportages and interactive projects, such as those discussed here. I also found explicit examples of witnessing, on the part of the photojournalist and family members, such as the photojournalist's reflecting on her decision not to photograph but rather to write what she saw, which I interpret as a

form of witnessing, following Peters. In that moment, the photojournalist expressed ambivalence about her professional role and wrestled with an ethics of showing (Linfield). And the father in the family narrated a traumatic experience, a form of witnessing that is personal and also communicates to a community of spectators (Sliwinski). What sets the analyzed stories published over time apart from the contest entries is a focus on everyday life—non-dramatic moments and relationships in mundane settings. Further research on photojournalism might look into such varied visual forms as well as forms of extended coverage over time. In this respect, the stories about the Swirakly family, although not analyzed here according to the typology, appear to offer a space for spectators to engage, through commitment to following the articles, but perhaps more as a fellow citizen than a witness of crisis.

The question of how photographs contribute to our understanding of the experience of forced migration must be discussed in specific context, as in the examples provided here. The work of photojournalists, which is the focus of this essay, is shaped by a number of factors, as discussed previously. Furthermore, a story may call for dramatic images showing the impact of an event, such as the plight of refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean. As a result, images made and selected for publication may or may not portray people in a way that evokes empathy—and those people may or may not have agency or speak to their experience. These are some of the limitations of journalism and, by extension, photojournalism.

By sponsoring the rescue vessels in the Mediterranean with its own journalists on board, the Swedish newspaper also eschewed a position of neutrality. While my analyses focused primarily on visual images and practices, it is important to also draw attention to how news organizations shape the coverage. The news organization's initiative can also be interpreted as support of a certain migration policy by foregrounding the plight of refugees. Thus, the newspaper and its owner took a humanitarian position, in effect aiding the refugees on humanitarian grounds. However, the boats also provided access to unique coverage. The participating newspapers ran stories where their photographers and reporters who had participated in the op-

eration recalled the horrors of seeing people drowned, yet satisfaction at being able to help (Bardell and Wiman). While this kind of testimony is frequently used in crisis reporting, it also foregrounds the intervention of journalists as agents of the story.[19] As a result, while the sea rescue fulfills a humanitarian obligation to assist those at risk of drowning, the news coverage arguably risks placing people experiencing flight in the position of "deserving refugee." The Swedish news organization, as sponsor of the operation, foregrounds its own empathy with the coverage, an effect found by Chouliaraki and Stolic, who found that the position of self-reflexivity tended to focus on the efforts of the benefactors.[20] Elements of this position can also be found in the coverage of the Swirakly family, though more so in the text than in the images, showing the challenge of maintaining a focus on the protagonist and their agency when the storyteller is in focus.[21]

Sliwinski and Linfield, in their respective work, discuss image-makers' witnessing and their response to the experience as constitutive of the visualization. These authors also discuss photojournalists' reflections on the boundaries, limitations, and potential of photography and their profession. From the perspective of a photojournalist, the challenge may be how to adequately capture and visualize the impact of atrocities or trauma. A spectator's challenge, in turn, is to not turn away but to engage with the image. According to Sliwinski, "[…] such encounters with the incommensurable are encounters with the ground zero of history and politics itself (136)[…] But even angst demands to be communicated, indeed, perhaps *especially* this feeling, this brush up against the incommensurable, this aesthetic meeting with injustice that drives the world spectator to share the evaluation with others" (136-137). What follows is an expanded responsibility on the part of the public to engage critically with history, photographs, and the photojournalists doing the coverage, and to call for empathetic visual portrayals.

## WORKS CITED

Allan, Stuart. "Witnessing in Crisis: Photoreportage of Terror Attacks in Boston and London." *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 7, no. 2, Aug. 2014, pp. 133-151.

Andén-Papadopoulos, Kari. "The Picture of the Year and its View of the World." *Picturing Politics: Visual and Textual Formations of Modernity in the Swedish Press*, edited by Karin Becker, Jan Ekekrantz, and Tom Olsson, JMK, Stockholm University, 2000, pp. 196-211.

*Arets Bild*. Årets Bild Sverige, AB, 2018.

—. Årets Bild Sverige, AB, 2017.

—. Årets Bild Sverige, AB, 2016.

Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Zone Books, 2012.

Bardell, Anders and Erik Wiman. "Jag höll fast en mamma med en liten bebis." *Aftonbladet*, 28 April, 2016, *https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/RxE622/jag-holl-fast-en-mamma-med-en-liten-bebis*. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Bengtsson Lundin, Rebecca. *Appearance and Photographs of People in Flight: A Quality Study of Photojournalistic Practices in Spaces of (Forced) Migration*. Doctoral dissertation. Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University, 2021, http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-197547.

Bleiker Roland, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison, and Xzarina Nicholson. "The Visual Dehumanization of Refugees." *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2013, pp. 398-416.

Bock, Mary Angela. "Together in the Scrum: Practicing News Photography for Television, Print, and Broadband." *Visual Communication Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2008, pp. 169-179.

Chouliaraki, Lilie. *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. Sage Publications, 2006.

Chouliaraki, Lilie and Myra Georgiou. "Hospitability: The Communicative Architecture of Humanitarian Securitization at Europe's Borders." *Journal of Communication,* vol. 67, 2017, pp. 159-180.

Chouliaraki, Lilie and Tijana Stolic. "Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee 'Crisis': A Visual Typology of European News." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 39, no. 8, 2017, pp. 1162-1177.

*Dagens Nyheter*. "Bilderna som inte tas säger ibland mest." 29 December 2015, https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/bilderna-som-inte-tas-sager-ibland-mest/. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Dencik, Lina and Stuart Allan. "In/visible Conflicts: NGOs and the Visual Politics of Humanitarian Photography." *Media, Culture & Society*, August 18, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717726865.

Fahmy, Shahira, Mary Angela Bock and Wayne Wanta. *Visual Communication Theory and Research: A Mass Communication Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Fehrenbach, Heide and Davide Rodogno. "A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective." *International Perspective of the Red Cross*, vol. 97, no. 9, 2015, pp. 1121-1155.

Frosh, Paul and Amit Pinchevski. "Media Witnessing and the Ripeness of Time." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2014, pp. 594-610.

Fröberg, Jonas. "Laeans familj startar ett nytt liv efter flykten från IS." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 January 2016, https://www.svd.se/nytt-liv-i-sverige-efter-flykten-fran-is. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Fröberg, Jonas. "Räddades ur vågorna-nu väntar de på att livet ska börja." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 February 2017, https://www.svd.se/raddades-ur-vagorna--nu-vantar-de-pa-att-livet-ska-borja. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Fröberg, Jonas and Malin Hoelstad. "Brevet tänder en låga av hopp." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 3 April 2016, https://www.svd.se/brevet-tander-en-laga-av-hopp. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Fröberg, Jonas and Malin Hoelstad. "Möter vattnet igen efter Medelhavet: Ska vi dö här?" *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 August 2016, https://www.svd.se/hopp-och-fortvivlan-i-boras. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Fröberg, Jonas and Malin Hoelstad. "Gud har gett oss en ny dotter i Sverige-Malin." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 8 December 2016, https://www.svd.se/nytt-hopp-men-oron-kvar-for-familjen-swirakly. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Fröberg, Jonas and Malin Hoelstad. "Räddad till Sverige-men har inte fått SFI-undervisning." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 4 November 2017, https://www.svd.se/raddad-till-sverige--har-inte-fatt-sfi-undervisning. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Fröberg, Jonas and Malin Hoelstad. "Vi träffar familjen Swirakly-så funkar svensk integrationspolitik." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 9 February 2019, https://www.svd.se/jattetufft-lara-sig-svenska--men-jag-far-skylla-mig-sjalv. Accessed 15 November2020.

Fröberg, Jonas and Erica Treijs. "Räddades ur havet - nu får Rodan träffa mamma igen." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 28 January 2018, https://www.svd.se/raddades-ur-havet--nu-far-rodan-traffa-mamma-igen. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Hoelstad, Malin. "Bilderna jag inte tog på dödens hav." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 December 2015, https://www.svd.se/bilderna-jag-inte-tog. Accessed 15 November2020.

Hoelstad, Malin and Jonas Fröberg. "Starka bilder-Familjen Swiraklys första år i Sverige." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 8 December 2016, https://www.svd.se/starka-bilder-familjens-swirakys-forsta-ar-i-sverige. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Jelmini, Maria. "SvD prisas för Gula Båtarna-kampanj och affärsmodell." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 May 2015, https://www.svd.se/svd-vann-pris-for-gula-batarna-kampanj.Accessed 15 November 2020.

Kedra, Joanna and Mélodine Sommier. "Children in the Visual Coverage of the European Refugee Crisis: A Case Study of the World Press Photo 2016." *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, vol.7, no. 1, 2018, pp. 37-58.

Láb, Filip, and Sandra Štefaniková. "Photojournalism in Central Europe: Editorial and working Practices." *Nordicom Review*, vol. 38(special issue 2), 2017, pp. 7-23. doi: 10.1515/nor-2017-0411.

Langton, Loup. *Photojournalism and Today's News. Creating Visual Reality*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Linfield, Susie. *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Mortensen, Mette, Stuart Allan, and Chris Peters. "The Iconic Image in a Digital Age: Editorial Mediations over the Alan Kurdi Photographs." *Nordicom Review*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2017, pp. 71-86.

Mortensen, Mette, and Hans-Jörg Trenz. "Media Morality and Visual Icons in the Age of Social Media: Alan Kurdi and the Emergence of an Impromptu Public of Moral Spectatorship." *Javnost/The Public*, vol. 23, 2016, pp. 343-362.

Musarò, Pierluigi. "Mare Nostrum: The Visual Politics of a Military-humanitarian Operation in the Mediterranean Sea." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 38, 2017, pp. 11-28.

Nair, Parvati. "The Razor's Edge: Image and Corpo-reality at Europe's Borders." In *Photography and Migration*, edited by Tanya Sheehan, Routledge, 2018, pp. 83-99.

Nilsson, Maria. "Visualizing the Experience of Flight: Photojournalistic Portraits and Refugee Migration. *Novos Olhares*, vol. 9, no. 1, Jan.-June 2020, pp. 130-141.

Östman, Kari. "De ska rädda liv, på Medelhavet." *Aftonbladet*, 26 October 2015, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/m6V49L/de-ska-radda-liv--pa-medelhavet. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Pantti, Mervi. "The Personalization of Conflict Reporting: Visual Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis on Twitter." *Digital Journalism*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 124-145.

Peters, John Durham. "Witnessing." *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2001, pp. 707-724.

Proitz, Lin. "Visual Social Media and Affectivity: The Impact of the Image of Alan Kurdi and Young People's Response to the Refugee Crisis in Oslo and Sheffield." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2018, pp. 548-563.

Sliwinski, Sharon. *Human Rights in Camera*. The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

*Sveriges Radio P4 Gävleborg*. "Malin nominerad i Sveriges mest prestigefyllda fototävling." 13 March 2019, https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7173597. Accessed 15 November 2020.

*Sveriges Radio P4 Sjuhärad*. "Jonas och Malin räddade boråsfamilj vid Medelhavet." 29 August 2017, https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6766120. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Thomson, T. J. *To See and Be Seen: The Environments, Interactions and Identities Behind News Images*. Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019.

Treijs, Erica. "Familjen Swirakly i Borås: Fick jobb efter fyra år i Sverige." December 23, 2019. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 23 December 2019, https://www.svd.se/efter-fyra-ar-i-sverige--antligen-ett-jobb-stolt. Accessed 15 November 2020.

Wolthers, Louise. "Seeing through Scandinavian Exceptionalism: Tina Enghoff's Photography. *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2017, pp. 372-391.

Wright, Terence. "Moving Images: The Media Representation of Refugees." *Visual Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, pp. 53-66.

Yaschur, Carol. "Shooting the Shooter: How Experience Level Affects Photojournalistic Coverage of a Breaking News Event." *Visual Communication Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 3-4, 2012, pp. 160-176.

Zelizer, Barbie. "On 'Having Been There.': 'Eyewitnessing' as a Journalistic Keyword." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2007, pp. 408-428.

## NOTES

1. https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html.

2. https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/pong/statistikyhet/asylsokande-grund-for-bosattning-utlandsk-bakgrund-medborgarskapsbyten-adoptioner-hushallsstatistik-och-medellivslangder-2015/.

3. https://unric.org/sv/sveriges-oeppna-armar/.

4. https://www.regeringen.se/496b04/contentassets/fba5199a65f348269d82a8e6e146bda9/andrade-regler-i-utlanningslagen.pdf.

5. Nominated entries are those awarded either first, second, or third place in the contest. In the context of the contest, nominated entries are publicly circulated in the contest yearbook and in the annual exhibition showcasing the contest.

6. The Swedish Picure of the Year contest, founded in 1942, is open to members of the Swedish Press Photographer's Club, PFK. Only professional photojournalists and photojournalism students may become members. A jury of peers, usually with one jury member from each of the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, meets to judge the entries. The selection process is based on a blind review of submissions.

7. In a previous study, I analyzed portraits of children experiencing forced migration. Those images are therefore excluded from this analysis, with one exception: an image made by photojournalist Malin Hoelstad, of a father and his son fishing, discussed here as a visualization of a father figure, and as part of extended coverage of one family. The image won 2nd place in the domestic everyday life singles category in the 2017 contest.

8. 2nd place, international everyday life singles 2017. Photographer: Magnus Wennman. 1st place, international news singles 2018. Photographer: Christoffer Hjalmarsson. 3rd place, international news singles. Photographer: Anders Hansson. 1st place, international reportage 2018. Photographer: Christoffer Hjalmarsson.

9. 2nd place, international reportage 2016. Photographer: Anders Hansson.

10. Specifically, the news photo of the year 2015 is a close-up of a child in repose set against a dark backdrop, eyes wide open. Kedra and Sommier, who analyzed this image and others in the series of images of children sleeping on the ground, in a forest, or on sidewalk, found that the image-maker uses the rhetorical figure of "oxymoron," that is, two incompatible positions which, in turn, raise questions in viewers.

11. 2nd place, international news singles 2016. Photographer: Roger Turesson.

12. 2nd place, international news singles 2018. Photographer: Niclas Hammarström. 1st place, multimedia 2018. Photographer: Niclas Berglund.

13. 3rd place, domestic news singles 2016. Photographer: Bosse Nilsson.

14. 1st place, domestic news singles 2016. Photographer: Anders Hansson.

15. 2nd place, domestic everyday life singles 2017. Malin Hoelstad. I analyzed this image in a previous study (Nilsson 2020).

16. 1st place, domestic reportage 2017. Photographer: Linus Sundahl-Djerf.

17. 2nd place, domestic news singles 2017. Photographer: Jessica Gow.

18. 2nd place, domestic reportage 2017. Photographer: Magnus Hjalmarsson Niederman.

19. On the anniversary of the rescue operation, *Aftonbladet* was present when a rescued family, now residing in Sweden, met with crew members who had saved them (Nygren).

20. Chouliaraki further develops this argument in *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-humanitarianism*. Polity, 2013.

21. This tension has been pointed out by Chouliaraki, who notes that the position of self-reflexivity tends to focus on the efforts of the benefactors, an argument treated more extensively by Chouliaraki in *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-humanitarianism*. Polity, 2013.