

# **“We all die until the Times Photographer wins the prize”: Visual Culture of Forced Migration and Its Possible Impact on Displaced Students’ Access to Higher Education**

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On 21 August 2021, in the middle of the human tragedy unfolding in Afghanistan, poet and artist Elyas Alavi posted on his Instagram story the words that give the title to this article: “We all die until the Times photographer wins the prize.”<sup>1</sup> The sentence was shared through a number of reposts and arrived in my feed via artist Raisan Hameed who is also contributor to this volume. I had just visited Hameed a few days prior in Leipzig for an interview about his work in photography and multi-media installations and his experience studying at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (Academy of Fine Arts) in Leipzig, Germany.<sup>2</sup>

Alavi’s words resonated heavily following my conversation with Hameed who had arrived in Germany from Iraq. Talking about his journey, he described one of the moments when landing on Europe’s shores: “There they were, the CNN photographers with their expensive equipment and big lenses, ready to shoot. They shoot and then go back to their hotel rooms and eventually get a publication out of it, and maybe an award, while we continue without any certainty.” When he left Iraq and the Mosul University College of Fine Arts, Hameed’s journey continued to the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst with a scholarship from the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, where he finished his BA in Fine Arts in Photography and is currently working on his Masters in the class of Tina Bara. While still working on his degree, he participated in a group show at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, and had further exhibitions in Leipzig, Dresden, Berlin, Rotterdam, Rome, Palermo, Sharjah and in Oman. Hameed’s journey really has just begun while others end before reaching a shore.

What actually happens when the ‘Times Photographer’ does win the prize? What constitutes the official visual culture of forced migration and how does this visual culture potentially shape migrants’ journeys to arrive at the lecture halls and seminar rooms of institutions of higher education?

These questions prompted me to look into photography that depicts forced migration and that has won some of the most prestigious prizes over the past six years (since the onset of refugee crises of 2015/16): World Press Photo Awards; Monovisions Awards; Pulitzer Prize; Sony Photo Awards; and IPA International Photo Awards. The result is surprisingly clear: the prized ‘Times Photographers’ most of the time take a step back and largely adhere to a ‘visual culture of the fence’ that sets up an inside-outside dichotomy of us-against-the-other. Or they zoom in closely to arrive at a ‘Langian’ picture, a photograph closely resembling Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, showing humans dressed in rags and most of the time in utter despair.

In the process from ‘shore-to-show,’ award-winning photography creates an official canon through repetitions and reiterations of the same type of image in the channels of exhibition halls, press coverages, social media, and personal websites to ultimately shape all of our perceptions of what migration looks like. Neurologically speaking, our process of reading the visual world is guided by explicit prior knowledge to make sense and allocate meaning to external stimuli. We look for what we already know, for what has been validated and gives us certainty. Our perceptual system selects information based on what it is familiar with so that it can interpret new visual cues. We simply cannot escape the icons of official standards; they are the backseat drivers of our interpretative system.

<sup>1</sup> Elyas Alavi was born in the Daikundi province in Afghanistan with Hazara background and moved to Iran as a child when the war intensified in his home country. Since 2007 he has been living and working on Kaurna Country in Tarrantanya (Adelaide, Australia), where he graduated with a Master of Visual Arts at the University of South Australia in 2016, following his Bachelor of Visual Arts with Honors in 2013. He received numerous scholarships and published three poetry books in Afghanistan and in Iran for which he received prestigious prizes. <https://www.elyasalavi.com>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://raisanhameed.com/>

In 2020 Nicolò Filippo Rosso won Third Prize in the category Contemporary Issues of the World Press Photo Awards. His project *Exodus* “chronicles the epic journey of the Venezuelan migrants in 2018, driven by desperation and hunger, at the stake of forces beyond their control.”<sup>3</sup> His black-and-white close-up shot of a group of Venezuelans is startlingly close to Dorothea Lange’s award winning 1936 *Migrant Mother*: people with dirty faces huddled together, women’s hands close to or over their mouths, clothes in rags, gazes that blandly stare into the distance. A few years ago, I was sitting in a modern dance performance in a well-known theater in Toronto when one of the spectators behind me remarked shortly after the performance began: “Why do they always have to look like bloody refugees?” It was a Martha Graham piece and the dancers were clothed in layers of ripped black, grey, and brown fabrics. They closely resembled the ‘Langian’ type and the spectator’s remark confirms how deeply this image is engrained in our minds. It took Florence Owen Thompson 34 years to have her name put under the iconic image of her face. Will the individuals in Rosso’s project ever be known by name?

Beyond the ‘Langian’ type of close-up photography of migrants, the fence is one of the most dominating elements in award winning photography. Since 2016 Syrians, Afghans, Africans, Rohingya, Venezuelans, and Mexicans have been shown behind a fence or trying to climb up or passing through it. Barbed wire and vertical posts of steel or concrete have become some of the key identifiers in this iconography of migration. It doesn’t matter which border, camp, or crossing, the fence is always a marker that creates an inside-outside, an us-versus-them dynamic. Angelos Tzortzinis’ *Trials of Migration* (Sony Photo Awards 2016, First Place, Category: Current Affairs)<sup>4</sup>, Joseph Patronite’s *The Wall, Work, and Liberty* (Monovisions Award 2021, Category: Honorable Mention)<sup>5</sup>, and Reuters’ coverage of migration in South America (Pulitzer Prize 2019, Category: Breaking News Photography)<sup>6</sup> are all excellent projects. They aim at showing thousands of refugees and migrants fleeing political and social turmoil, giving an idea about their lives while on their journeys or once they land in a camp. They show the urgency, desperation and sadness of migrants and provide an essential perspective for all who do not get first-hand exposure to refugee camps.

There is no question that depicting the disasters and the hardship of migrants’ journeys is important and that all the ‘Times photographers’ are fully deserving of prizes they win exactly for that. How else would we know? Photographers take the public to places they would never travel and inform viewers about the continued tragedies of human lives; they equally risk their lives and often remain traumatized. Their physical and mental wounds resonate in their minds and haunt them well beyond the time of their documentary missions. The portraits of hardship and suffering also play a key role in the push for action – they raise the kind of awareness that is needed to generate crucial funds for both government organizations and NGOs to continue their work. But cumulatively and collectively this type of visual culture is not enough to create a different kind of perception that might pave the way for migrants to arrive at institutions of higher education. In 2021 UNHCR counted 89.3 million forcibly displaced people and the number is constantly rising.<sup>7</sup> If the perception of the migrant does not shift from the image of the ‘bloody refugee,’ the world is creating a demographic and social time bomb, given the exponential rise in numbers of forced migration since 2015. In Antonio Guterres’ words: “We can’t deter people fleeing for their lives.

<sup>3</sup> 2020 Nicolò Filippo Rosso <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo-contest/2020/nicolo-filippo-rosso/2>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.worldphoto.org/es/sony-world-photography-awards/winners-galleries/2016/professional/winners/current-affairs/1st-place>

<sup>5</sup> <https://monovisionsawards.com/winners-gallery/monovisions-awards-2021/show/6181>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/reuters-wins-pulitzer-prize-for-migrant-idUSRTX6RS1A>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> For the breakdown of this number, see the Introduction of this volume. At the moment when this volume is going live, we are in the middle of the war in Ukraine and can already add more than 4.8 million refugees to UNHCR’s 2021 figures to arrive at the total number of 89.3 million refugees in 2021. Addendum: UNHCR estimates that global forced displacement has reached 103 million at mid-2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

They will come. The choice we have is how well we manage their arrival, and how humanely.”<sup>8</sup> And how well we integrate them into our societies.

Just how much the path from ‘shore-to-show’ can influence migrants’ futures becomes clear by taking a closer look at the neurological process described as Predictive Coding Theory (PCT).<sup>9</sup> It states that the “process of perception is controlled by explicit prior knowledge and is based on active selection of information at very early stages of sub-cortical processing.”<sup>10</sup> Visual perception thus is never just receptive but an active process very much based on what we already know and have stored as familiar. In their article on PCT and photography, Henric Jokeit and Daniel Blochwitz take Dorothea Lange’s 1936 photograph *Migrant Mother* as the archetype and prime example of how photography is engrained in collective minds, and subsequently also becomes collectively owned,<sup>11</sup> through a process of canonized iconization. In the case of *Migrant Mother* canonized iconization started at the root of the project, as Lange was officially assigned to document the effects of the Great Depression through the governmental organs of both the Resettlement Administration (1935) and the Farm Security Agency (1937), hereby establishing the formal face of migration.

Jokeit and Blochwitz distinguish between anterograde episodic memory, the memory of pictorial information that we have only seen once, and semantic visual memory, which is visual data that we have seen countless times.<sup>12</sup> The issue with semantic visual memory is not only that we immediately recognize a picture’s visual content. It is more that this memory, because we consistently have been confronted with the same type of information, is also biographically decontextualized and no longer gives information about its initial time and place of encoding. That’s how it came about that the person behind me in the theater labelled the Martha Graham dancers as ‘bloody refugees’ as soon as they appeared on stage. Anybody with some prior interest in photography or knowledge of American history can retrieve Lange’s *Migrant Mother* from their memory and picture it mentally. This is what Jokeit and Blochwitz call memorability, the capacity “to generate a memory image in front of an inner mental eye and to describe it verbally.”<sup>13</sup> Memorability is different from recognizability, which is information that can only be identified when presented with a selection of visual information.<sup>14</sup> Ladislav Kesner confirms PCT and states that, according to Barret and Bar’s model, past experience conditions and modulates present perception whereby “the integration of top–down expectations and bottom–up sensory input can already be observed in the early visual cortex.”<sup>15</sup> Immediate recognition of visual content is experienced as a kind of cognitive reward that leads to a pleasurable sensation.<sup>16</sup> Thus the interpretation of images is guided by prior visual memory rather early in the perceptive process, whereby the affective impact of the visual information is crucial, assuming significant control in the encoding and subsequent memory of that information.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/36293-70th-anniversary-of-the-refugee-convention-a-legal-instrument-which-remains-as-relevant-today-when-forcible-displacement-has-reached-record-levels.html>

<sup>9</sup> H. Jokeit and D. Blochwitz, “Neuro-aesthetics and the Iconography in Photography,” *PsyCH Journal* (26 August 2020): 444–457. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pchj.379>

<sup>10</sup> Jokeit and Blochwitz, “Neuro-aesthetics and the Iconography in Photography,” 446.

<sup>11</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Migrant\\_Mother\\_by\\_Dorothea\\_Lange](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Migrant_Mother_by_Dorothea_Lange)

<sup>12</sup> Jokeit and Blochwitz, “Neuro-aesthetics and the Iconography in Photography,” 447.

<sup>13</sup> Jokeit and Blochwitz, “Neuro-aesthetics and the Iconography in Photography,” 447.

<sup>14</sup> Jokeit and Blochwitz, “Neuro-aesthetics and the Iconography in Photography,” 447.

<sup>15</sup> Ladislav Kesner, “The Predictive Mind and the Experience of Visual Art Work,” *Front. Psychol.* (16 December 2014) Sec. Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Volume 5 – 2014. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01417> See also L.F. Barrett and M. Bar, “See it with feeling: affective predictions during object perception,” *Philos. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B Biol. Sci.* 364 (2012): 1325–1334. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2008.0312>

<sup>16</sup> Kesner, “The Predictive Mind and the Experience of Visual Art Work.” See also S. Van de Cruys and J. Wagemans, “Putting reward in art: a tentative prediction error account of visual art,” *Iperception* 2 (2011): 1035–1062.

<sup>17</sup> See M. Mather and M. R. Sutherland, “Arousal-Biased Competition in Perception and Memory,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6(2) (2011): 114–133.



The question that comes to mind is whether we are doomed in a perpetual cycle ‘from-shore-to-show-to-shore-to-show’ that reproduces the same types of images over and over again?

One might think so, given that the very institutions whose endeavor it is to safeguard refugees’ well-being and to ensure their futures through education, reproduce the same visual canon in their official documents. The 2019 conference report *The Other 1%: Refugees at Institutions for Higher Education Worldwide*, which was issued jointly by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Global Refugee Forum, and UNHCR, features a young woman with a hijab on its title page: [https://www2.daad.de/medien/microsites/the-other-one-percent/report\\_2019.pdf](https://www2.daad.de/medien/microsites/the-other-one-percent/report_2019.pdf). Her expression is joyful but projected across her face is the shadow of a fence. The goal of the Berlin conference and its report was to reflect a shared vision to **help refugee youth realize opportunities for selfreliance** [original emphasis] for themselves and their communities.”<sup>18</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction of this volume, the good news is that from 2019 to 2021 the percentage of refugees accessing higher education has risen from 1% to 5%. But why the shadow of the fence in the key image of the report? It is fair to assume that the photograph was selected with all good intention but the fence by now is so deeply engrained in the visual culture of migration that even institutions whose aim is integration, the exact opposite of separation, unconsciously tap into the encoded memorability that characterizes the image of the migrant.

But not all is lost and the cycle has already been interrupted – it just needs a tipping point to effect more comprehensive change. Jokeit and Blochwitz also explain the effect of prediction errors, mismatches between expected and actual data or between actual data and anticipated interpretation, and how “prediction errors are processed because only these have a high value for behavioral adaptation.”<sup>19</sup> This means that deviations of canonical images have the power to irritate the adaptive and interpretative systems of the viewer and thus can initiate a point of departure for the creation of new memory.

César Dezfuli, *Passengers*, 2018 (Image courtesy ©César Dezfuli)



What concerns award winning photography, Cesar Dezfuli’s project *Passengers* could mark such a turning point. It is all about arrivals and one of the projects that won the Category Portraiture in the 2020 edition of the Sony Photo Awards. At first sight it seems to be the type of ‘in your face’ photography that Hameed described as disturbing due to its proximity to the subject. Getting extremely close physically or through the camera view finder also creates expectation. To be the subject of attention gives hope to being recognized as an individual

<sup>18</sup> [https://www2.daad.de/medien/microsites/the-other-one-percent/report\\_2019.pdf](https://www2.daad.de/medien/microsites/the-other-one-percent/report_2019.pdf), p.4,

<sup>19</sup> Jokeit and Blochwitz, “Neuro-aesthetics and the Iconography in Photography,” 448.

and as a human being. Dezfuli himself became aware of this, and, rather than being the completion of a documentary, his photography of the migrants' arrival marks the beginning of a remarkable project.

“On 1st August 2016, 118 people were rescued from a rubber boat drifting in the Mediterranean Sea. The boat had departed some hours prior from Libya. In an attempt to give a human face to this event, I photographed the passengers minutes after their rescue. Their faces, their looks, the marks on their bodies all reflected the mood and physical state they were in after a journey that had already marked their lives forever. It was the beginning of a project that has been evolving ever since.

It soon became clear that the people I photographed on that August day were not themselves. Their identities had become diluted somewhere along the way - hidden as a result of fear or stolen through past abuses and humiliations.

Over the last three years I have worked to locate the 118 passengers of the boat, now scattered across Europe, in a bid to understand and document their true identities. I wanted to show that each individual had a latent identity that just needed a peaceful context in order to flourish again.”<sup>20</sup>

César Dezfuli, *Passengers*, 2018 (Image courtesy ©César Dezfuli)



The effort to locate the human beings in his *Passengers* project is laudable and extremely important to make an impact on a global culture of migration. It also received wide critical acclaim, it has been shown in over 20 group and solo venues and received or has been nominated for over 30 awards.<sup>21</sup> In a recent conversation, Dezfuli told me that he now has located 105 of the 118 *Passengers* and that his journey in the project is now focused on tracing their integration processes. It goes beyond the scope of this article to

relate these stories but some of them are mind boggling, especially the one of a minor who eventually came to France where he founded an NGO that promotes better education for refugees. With his NGO he managed to get the attention of the French Government and has been working ever since to improve education opportunities for immigrants. Dezfuli, who had spent three weeks on a rescue boat in 2016 shuttling between Malta and Libya, has travelled all over Europe to trace his *Passengers* with the mission to demonstrate the complexity of their journeys and to provoke empathy. All this will be relayed in a documentary that he is currently working on.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.worldphoto.org/sony-world-photography-awards/winners-galleries/2020/professional/winners/1st-place-passengers-cesar>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.cesardezfuli.com/about>

*Passengers* is about the paths of human bodies, minds, and souls, rather than politics and policies. The visual culture of migration needs projects like this in order to move away from the image of the ‘bloody refugee.’ That *Passengers* is precisely a case of a prediction error is sadly confirmed in an instant of tragic afterlife, or better aftermath. In 2021 it was shown at the IAF in Basel, Switzerland, where on October 2<sup>nd</sup> in an act of racist violation, the faces of five known migrant portraits were torn into shreds. Dezfuli commented the violation at the time in an Instagram post: “If just a few photos generate this reaction in those who have destroyed the exhibition, what will be their reaction or their thoughts when they encounter people different from them every day?” The violence in Basel confirms not only the social time bomb of missed integration; it also highlights the power of photography and its potential to shape our perceptions, consciously, unconsciously and subconsciously. It would be advantageous to take note of these types of incidents, and, besides the canonical photography awards, in which all photographers incontestably are well deserving of their prizes, to create a kind of ‘prediction error prize’ of photography that forges new visual pathways and sets up new types of canons to give forcefully displaced humans a better chance to arrive at the lecture halls of educational institutions.

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